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Comunidade e Crise nos Filmes dos Irmãos Coen

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For Rui, Diogo and João who share my passion for cinema.

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palavras-chave comunidade, crise, identidade, individualismo, regionalismo, humor negro, cinema independente, pós-modernismo, cultura popular

resumo A presente dissertação propõe-se analisar as representações de comunidade e crise em três filmes dos irmãos Coen: *Fargo*, *The Big Lebowski* e *No Country for Old Men*. Após uma contextualização histórica, social e cultural dos irmãos Coen, segue-se um estudo que incidirá sobre as figurações de comunidade patentes nestes três filmes. Representando diferentes épocas, os três filmes diagnosticam uma crise gradual resultante da procura radical do individualismo.

keywords community, crisis, identity, individualism, regionalism, dark humor, independent cinema, postmodernism, popular culture

abstract This dissertation aims to analyze the filmic representation of community and crisis in three films by Joel and Ethan Coen: *Fargo* (1996), *The Big Lebowski* (1998) and *No Country for Old Men* (2007). After having outlined the historical, social and cultural context of the Coen brothers, the following sections will focus specifically on the fictional depictions of American communities patent in the three films. Representing different time periods, the three films diagnose an ongoing crisis resulting from the pursuit of individualism.

We get into the habit of living before acquiring the habit of thinking. In that race that hastens us toward death, the body maintains its irreparable lead.

Albert Camus, in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 1942

Índice/ Contents

Introductory Note

The first film I watched made by Joel and Ethan Coen was *Raising Arizona,* back in 1987. Obviously it left a mark. Throughout the film, I was continually struck by the depth and humor of the brothers' script and amazed to see humor presented in such a deadpan fashion. The Coen brothers' films are memorable, intelligent, challenging and quirky; besides this, they interest me. Perhaps also because they were not a critical or commercial success back then, they were different, hence I was drawn to watch them. Over the next years I was never disappointed, even if of lately I have watched them from a new perspective. Another important factor in the Coens' *oeuvre,* which should be taken into account, because it undoubtedly contributes to make their films so distinctive, is the stability of their personnel: their films have all been written, produced and directed by both Coens, photographed by Roger Deakins (since 1990), scored by Carter Burwell and they frequently cast favorite actors, such as, John Goodman, Steve Buscemi, John Turturro, Frances McDormand, Jon Polito, Josh Brolin, Holly Hunter and Jeff Bridges.

In order to be able to understand the Coens' accomplishment some broader consideration of American filmmaking is required, especially of the independent variety. Since the 1960s, independent cinema has played an important role in challenging the mainstream commercial and genre cinema. Independent cinema authors, like the Coens, find in it a creative freedom which cannot be found in Hollywood, they do not have to try and construct a world of dreams. Instead they can film their own personal vision of the world. Expressions, feelings, gestures and faces matter much more than the plots. In the Coens' case, their plots have a tendency to get ambushed. There is more at work here, however, than simply being a way of expressing different thoughts and eccentricities. Independent cinema is, as well, potently able to speak that which is forbidden by pre-defined systems of civility, respectability and good order.

The brothers Joel and Ethan Coen have been making films together, as independent filmmakers, for over thirty years. Although most viewers will hold pre-established ideas of what the films made by the Coen brothers are about, and may entertain the idea that they are essentially frivolous (the sum of all

rabbinical wisdom in *A Serious Man* is rambling, unexplicated anecdotes) or facetious (wild and irrelevant Heisenbergian physics theory is applied to a murder trial in *The Man who Wasn't There*) film-makers, my dissertation will attempt to show that they are not, and that nothing about them is straightforward, especially regarding their diagnosis of what remains of community in America. In a general perspective, the Coens are known for their distinctive landscapes, their sophisticated camera work, dark humor, violence, voiceovers, dialogues, genre hybridization, and pastiches. However, what they are *not* distinguished for – the creation and celebration of fictional communities - reveals more about life in America than one might imagine.

I will begin by illustrating the amplitude of meaning attached to the concept "community". Using various sources, I will provide some general definitions but also try to arrive at a formulation that applies to the context of the Coen brothers' filmography. This will steer us in the direction of the concept of imagined communities, as popularized by Benedict Anderson. It is through these imagined communities and the use of (ironized) cultural regionalisms that we are able to perceive another America: no shining city on a hill as (some might say) represented by classic filmmaker, Frank Capra.

This will bring us closer to the main aim of my dissertation, which is to depict how community and its crises are used in the context of postmodern cinema to disclose a different America. The films of the Coen brothers reveal a sharp awareness of history / film / literature and their resort to pastiche functions as a way of "building bridges" or connecting with the past and with their movie-literate viewers. They convey a critique of the myth of small town American life, while at the same time (somewhat ambiguously) defending a core of values. They have developed a "Coenesque*"* ironizing gaze over American life besides having a postmodern fascination with popular culture and its compelling surfaces. For over a quarter of a century, now, the Coens seem to be telling us that the only certain thing is that there are no certainties and that the current order will pass. This is what makes their films so quirky and so absurd.

This study will be conducted in four main chapters. In the first one, I will examine community, try to define it and explore its use in postmodern cinema in general and by the Coens in particular. This outline of imagined communities

will provide the basis for larger conclusions about the Coens' filmography. In this chapter, I will also explore historical, cultural and film historical influences. Beginning with a brief historical overview, where Capra's uniqueness and importance in traditional American cinema will be dealt with, I will try to compare and contrast the two adjectives: Capraesque and Coenesque. From the 1980's, the neo-conservatives wanted to restore supposedly traditional values and practices. But this became impossible after the Vietnam War and the birth of a more divided America; nevertheless it helped to provide a fertile soil for the Coens' satire to flourish. The Coens are unyielding believers in the absurdity of the world where man finds himself and must act despite having only incomplete knowledge, with no moral absolutes to guide him. As stated in *Joel & Ethan Coen*, "characters in Coen films stare helplessly at their own lives and at themselves because they don't know whether they are the victim of stupid coincidence or of powerful metaphor" (Körte & Seesslen,1999: 211). This existential absurdity underlies most of their films and further accentuates the need for community.

In the next three chapters, which I devote to the analysis of three individual films: *Fargo* (1996); *The Big* Lebowski (1998); and *No Country for Old Men* (2007), I will examine how the Coens' postmodern techniques combine to make them cold and abrasive storytellers; but I will also demonstrate that they are affectionate and even moving in their portrayal of how the break-up of traditional communities has come to mean a lack of guidance and support as well as the emergence of rootless and lonely individuals. This is done, I would argue, with a little help from the strong women characters - although the Coens are far from being actively and consistently feminist - if there is any wisdom it is grounded in the women. I hope to be able to offer a riposte to those critics who think that their films are much ado about nothing and to show, quite the opposite, that they explore alternatives to traditional social arrangements as it is impossible to preserve the unpreservable and the factitious.

Chapter One: Theorizing Community in Contemporary Western Society

1. Towards a definition of Community

According to the English Dictionary, Community can be defined as follows:

> 1. a group of people living in the same place or having a particular characteristic in common; a group of people living together and practising common ownership; a particular area or place considered together with its inhabitants: *a rural community*, *local communities;* a body of nations or states unified by common interests: *the European Community*;(**the community**) the people of a district or country considered collectively, especially in the context of **social values** and **responsibilities;** society; denoting a worker or resource designed to serve the people of a particular area: *community health services*;
> 2 . the condition of sharing or having certain attitudes and interests in common; a similarity or identity; joint ownership or liability: *the community of goods*
>
> In, *The Oxford English Dictionary* (2010)

The word "community" is derived from the Old French c*ommunité* which is derived from the Latin *communitas* (*cum*, "with/together" + *munus*, "gift"), coming from two Latin words meaning "with gifts," the term community suggests a general sense of altruism, reciprocity, and beneficence that comes from working together. Communities help create a shared language, rituals and customs, and a collective memory for those that are part of the group. These definitions of Community substantiate and complete each other. For my purpose I will consider a community a group of people sharing common interests, living together in a specific area and sometimes sharing a common culture and/or heritage. Yet, while these definitions are scientifically accurate, they do not convey the richness, diversity and complexity of human communities. Thus, we must look to social theory to help us get a deeper understanding of the multilayered definition of the term “Community”.

The process of learning to adopt the behavior patterns of a particular community is called socialization. As children we normally develop skills and

knowledge necessary to function within our community. Socialization is influenced mainly by the family – transmission of a sense of belonging and identity as well as of values and responsibilities - through which children first learn community norms. They then interact at school and later at work, thus developing an individual and group identity, creating associations that connect them to community experiences. Connection and interaction both widen and deepen our individual character. As Alexis de Tocqueville said (1887), the norms of tolerance, reciprocity, and trust are important "habits of the heart," for an individual's healthy involvement in community. If we think of identity developing through our choice of which combination of universal ideas in which to participate, Community develops through what we have in common with other individual identities.

According to German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies there are two types of human connection: *Gemeinschaft* ("community"—its root *Gemeinde* actually means “local community”) and *Gesellschaft* ("society" or "association"). From Tönnies’ perspective, family and friendship are the perfect expressions of Community, but other characteristics in common, such as place or belief, can also create a Community. Society, on the other hand, is a group in which the individuals who belong to it are motivated to take part in the group only by self-interest. Groups are by no means only pure Community or pure Society, but, rather, a mixture of the two (English Translation, 1957: 22). Although various definitions of “Community” are possible there are three related qualities which appear frequently in discussions of “Community”: Tolerance; Reciprocity; and Trust. Self-interest brings people together, but only through interaction do these three qualities materialize.

Anthony P. Cohen also argues that ‘community’ involves two related propositions that the members of a group have something in common with each other; and that the thing held in common differentiates them from the members of other groups (1985: 12). Community, therefore, implies both similarity and difference. Defining a boundary inevitably places some people inside, and others outside, the border. Thus, the definition of Community can be both inclusionary and exclusionary, as the benefits of belonging to a particular group are denied to those who are not part of that group. In conclusion, and for the purpose of my work, it suffices to add that, a "sense of Community is a feeling

that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together." (McMillan, 1976 quoted in McMillan & Chavis, 1986: 9)

1.1. Types of Community

Gusfield (1975) distinguishes between two major uses of the term “Community”. The first is the territorial and geographical notion of community - neighborhood, town, city. A ‘territorial’ community can be seen as a location where people have something in common, this is understood in a geographical way. The second idea is relational, otherwise known as ‘interest’ or ‘elective’ communities, where people share a common characteristic other than location. (McMillan & Chavis, 1986: 8) Hence it is possible to speak of the ‘gay community’, or the ‘Amish community’. ‘Elective groups’ and ‘intentional communities’, such as cyber-communities, have become more and more common in our contemporary world. These different ways of describing Community may overlap on particular occasions. One community can contain another, for example, a geographic community may contain a number of ethnic communities. Likewise, location and interest communities many times coincide. But functional communities, regardless of the type, “are those that offer members positive ways to interact, important events to share and ways to resolve them positively, opportunities to honor members, opportunities to invest in the community, and opportunities to experience a spiritual bond among members.” (McMillan & Chavis, 1986: 14)

1.2. The importance of Community

One thing to consider is that the existence of community provides a sense of attachment, of security to its members, people feel encouraged to share. This feeling of staying connected and thereby forming social networks comprises what has become known, nowadays, as social capital. As stated by Robert D. Putnam,

> social capital refers to connections among individuals—social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them. In that sense social capital is closely related to what some have called "civic virtue". The difference is that "social capital" calls attention to the fact that civic virtue is most powerful when embedded in a dense network of reciprocal social relations. A society of many virtuous but isolated individuals is not necessarily rich in social capital (2000: 19).

In other words, interaction enables people to build communities, to commit themselves to each other, and to interweave the 'social fabric', or else - and to quote Putnam's wonderful title - individuals will be "bowling alone". Traditional communities were mostly concerned with the cultivation of good will, fellowship, sympathy and social intercourse among their members. In the past, as today, in American community life, family and religion play a central role. Churches help provide social support, inculcate the moral values taught by the family, and encourage altruism among the members of the community. Nowadays, though, the younger generations are less involved both in collective religious and in secular activities than were their parents. Americans are going to church less; hence the churches are less engaged with the wider community. Trends in religious life reinforce the worrying decline of social connectedness in the secular community (Putnam, 2000: 79). As in politics and society in general, disengagement appears to be the tendency, social patterns have loosened up, individuality is more accepted - and strongly promoted, even - people no longer feel that they have to do what everyone else does.

In a society where the trend is towards valorizing the individual it seems natural that political, religious and civic involvement in the community should take a plunge. According to Robert Wuthnow, societies are fostering a different type of Community:

> The kind of community [small groups] create is quite different from the communities in which people have lived in the past. These communities are more fluid [these are liquid times] and more concerned with the emotional states of the individual…People feel cared for. They help one another…. But in another sense small groups may not be fostering community as effectively as many of their proponents would like. Some small groups merely provide occasions for individuals to focus on themselves in the presence of others. (quoted in Putnam, 2000:152)

Today's dynamic Communities are too easily accessed making dedication, trust, and reciprocity difficult to develop, thus the guidance provided by the family finds no echo here. A shift from locational to vocational communities is taking place, or as Tönnies would say, Americans are investing more in Society and less in Community (more in wideness rather than in deepness). Individuality is of course important but if the values acquired within the family are not reiterated by the wider community, ravening egos will flourish. Coen characters systematically make lousy individual judgments but because they are not part of a wider community there is nobody there to guide or counsel them, hence their madness is reinforced. When people lack connection to others, they are unable to test the veracity of their own views. Without such an opportunity, people are more likely to be influenced by their worse impulses (Putnam, 2000: 122). This crisis in community could be partly responsible for the significant growth of crime in the United States in the last third of the twentieth century.

The largest increase in this lack of trust and reciprocity seems most evident in the increase for legal work and in what is kindly termed "preventive lawyering" (reminiscent of The Massey Pre-Nup in the Coens' *Intolerable Cruelty, 2003*). In American society, beginning around 1970, informal understandings no longer seemed adequate or prudent. Everyone began to demand "getting it in writing" therefore the expanded role of the lawyer "contrives […] to supplement the failing supply of reciprocity, moral obligation, and fellow-feeling […] Lawyers contrive to provide 'artificial trust'". For better or worse, they are forced to rely increasingly on formal institutions, on the law, "to accomplish what used to be accomplished through informal networks reinforced by generalized reciprocity—that is through social capital" (Putnam, 2000: 147).

The size of the community makes a difference; community projects are more common in small towns than in big cities. As the population grows, it becomes impossible for each individual to know all other people personally: characteristically, city residents meet one another in highly fragmented roles. They are more dependent on other people for the satisfaction of their daily needs than rural residents and so are associated with a greater number of organized groups, but they are less dependent upon particular persons, and their dependence on others is limited to fractionalized aspects. Benedict Anderson argues that we are all members of imagined Communities. According

to him, an imagined community is different from an actual community because it is not based on everyday face-to-face interaction between its members. Instead, members hold in their minds a mental image of their affinity. “In fact, all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined” (2006: 6-7). I agree with Anderson in the sense that we are becoming more and more imagined and less and less actual communities.

1.3. The Crisis in Community

As Putnam argues, and the Coen brothers dramatize, community involvement has been falling in the United States; the reasons for this decline are familiar to us: *Changes in family structure* (i.e. with more and more people living alone); *Suburban sprawl* (people’s spatial integrity has been fractured); *Electronic entertainment*, (especially television, and now Internet, has deeply privatized leisure time); and last, but definitely the most influential, is *Generational change (*a slow but steady replacement of a more civic generation by their less involved children). (Putnam, 2000: 277-284)

Relevant to the changes in family structure, is the role of women. Women have always been more avid social capitalists than men (in the past they were the ones who visited, telephoned and had an altogether more involved role in the community) but if women are busy working, studying or being single/divorced mothers and caring for a home, they will hardly find time to be involved in community life. Regarding suburban sprawl, people own more cars, therefore they have more mobility; generally they take more journeys to more distant places, but this mobility has been pointed out as an enemy of satisfaction (Jean Baudrillard). Another important factor to consider is that over the last century there has been a growing investment in a privatized social life, with electronic entertainment becoming the focus of most of our leisure time. Heavy users of these new forms of entertainment have a tendency to become more isolated, passive, and detached from their communities (as I will further discuss in my analysis of *Fargo*). An insightful synopsis of the impact of television on community comes from a member of an Amish community:

> We can almost always tell if a change will bring good or bad tidings. Certain things we definitely do not want, like the television ... They would destroy our visiting practices. We would stay at home with the television…rather than meet other people. The visiting practices are important because of the closeness of the people. How can we care for the neighbor if we do not visit them or know what is going on in their lives? (quoted in Putnam, 2000: 235)

Granted that this is a radical perspective, but there is some underlying truth beneath it. In summary, there seems to be an overall lack of organization as well as a loosening of social patterns which is responsible for the decline in the involvement in community life, and which naturally, has its consequences; you do not care for your neighbor if you cannot find the time to know him or her.

The studies of sociologists like McMillan and Chavis show evidence that young people who feel a sense of belonging to a community, particularly small communities, develop fewer psychiatric and depressive disorders than those who do not feel that sense of belonging. This feeling of belonging is crucial in helping one develop a sense of identity (McMillan and Chavis, 1986: 24-40) but also of responsibility. The lack of a healthy involvement in the community, promotes a sense of exclusion. Nowadays, a loss of belief, the anxiety of modern times and the fragmentation of geopolitical worlds are all contributing to the division of one's identity- something which inevitably limits the individual's sense of place and belonging. This crisis in Community will keep nurturing disillusioned, isolated and alienated individuals who sometimes embody negative forces of destruction and anxiety. The cultivation of social networks and the norms of responsibility, trust and respect for hierarchy they require are of great importance to minimize the crisis in Community. Of course, such networks can be oppressive and narrowing as well, as will be seen in my discussion of *Fargo*. Therefore, it is important to work for the promotion of tolerance and acceptance, because, such as McMillan and Chavis state, there is "a need to develop communities that can appreciate individual differences" (1986:12) recognize and respect them.

The kind of stories the Coens tell reflect current cultural ideas and trends because the brothers are, though in different degrees, people of their times. "We grew up in America, and we tell American stories in American settings

within American frames of reference." (Ethan Coen quoted in Conard, 2009: 7) Their films offer us a view of America representative of the fragmented relationships of its society, where community is in crisis, due to a radical individualism.

2. The treatment of Community in postmodern cinema

2.1. Mainstream and independent American cinema

According to Susan Hayward, mainstream (or dominant) American cinema is generally understood to be made in Hollywood. In this type of cinema the narrative must have closure; any ambiguity within the plot must be resolved before ending. The standard plot is the norm: order / disorder / order-restored. Whatever the closure, almost without exception, it will express a message that is central to dominant ideology: the law successfully apprehends criminals; good conquers evil and so on (even if it is necessary to introduce the reassuring romantic *deus ex machina* beloved by the mainstream filmmakers). The love stories are heterosexual and feminists have pointed out that mainstream cinema perpetuates and normalizes patriarchal ideologies. The narrative is the main aspect: shots, lightning, color must not draw attention anymore than the editing, *mise-en-scène* or sound. The spectator must know where she or he is in time and space and in relation to the logic and chronology of the narrative. The plot is goal oriented and so, naturally, the action focuses on central characters and the plot is character-driven (which nourishes the Hollywood "star" system). The films depict a view of idealized America. The mythical-realistic storyline reflects a great American myth: that of upward mobility and success. The Hollywood "dream factory" makes the American dream come true every time. (2006: 84)

As a challenge to the Hollywood dream factory, a new type of cinema emerged. Independent Cinema in America became official with The First Statement of the New American Cinema Group published in September 30, 1962. According to its authors:

> The official cinema all over the world is running out of breath. It is morally corrupt, esthetically obsolete, thematically superficial, temperamentally

> boring. Even the seemingly worthwhile films, those that lay claim to high moral and esthetic standards and have been accepted as such by critics and the public alike, reveal the decay of the Product Film. The very slickness of their execution has become a perversion covering the falsity of their themes, their lack of sensibility, their lack of style. If the New American Cinema has until now been an unconscious and sporadic manifestation, we feel the time has come to join together… We are concerned with Man. We are concerned with what is happening to Man… We believe that cinema is indivisibly a personal expression. We therefore reject the interference of producers, distributors and investors until our work is ready to be projected on the screen. (Everleth, 2007: n.p.)

Although American independent cinema only became official in the sixties, it actually reaches back to the birth of cinema with independent filmmakers working outside the three major companies – Edison, Biograph and Vitagraph – the Big Three. But in contrast to those earlier experimental filmmakers they do not work against mainstream narratives, they just work differently: they are willing to do what the major studios will not do. Comparing to mainstream cinema, independent films try to engage with life – dealing with social and contemporary issues. Independent filmmakers, like their mainstream counterparts, are also storytellers. But where Hollywood is “the dream factory” this cinema is more interested in documenting, or creating something closer to reality. The plot is not very important, or its importance is reduced when compared to mainstream cinema. (Merrit, 2000: 3-9)

These new films became more popular in the sixties, compared to earlier experimental film, due to the fact that the audience was younger and more sophisticated than Hollywood’s traditional audience. This younger audience, which grew up with television, knew how to process audiovisual language. During the late seventies and the eighties, the modern independent scene took shape, creating the new independent system of recent years. By 2007, the majority of the films that won Oscars were technically "independent," in that they did not originate with major studios (although many of them later were picked up by major studios for distribution).

The Coen brothers are labeled independent filmmakers not only because their quirky films are produced outside the major Hollywood studios, but also due to their questioning accepted areas of genre realism. Since their first film

Blood Simple (1984) the Coens knew that they wanted to make radically different films: Joel Coen "It's almost axiomatic that a movie's principal characters have to be sympathetic and that the movie has to supply moral uplift, people like it. But that's not interesting to us." (Allen, 2006: 68) And that is what they do, they make crime comedies that consistently displace viewers' expectations, they are fond of "convoluted crime plots, ironic reversals, and a wildly inventive visual style". (Leitch, 2002: 276)

When the Coens decided to create their first feature, they shot an audition piece, and showed it along with the script to potential investors. They managed to raise the necessary money and adopted the practice of completely storyboarding all their films first, as a way to save money (Alfred Hitchcock used to do this as well). The Coens share the screenwriting credit, Joel is listed as director while Ethan as producer, they also edit under the pseudonym "Roderick Jaynes" and they are known in the film business as "the two-headed director". Their films are fascinated with style; and they are not plot-driven or star-driven. They care about the process of filmmaking and they are sensitive to diversity, to regional differences, to the different "Americas". Ever since their first film, theirs has been a very successful contribution and partnership. They have been working together for thirty years and like some of their antecedents, at times, they have managed to make commercially successful films (as have Quentin Tarantino and Steven Soderbergh). Mainstream cinema usually ends up following successful paths and begins by financing Hollywood offshoots through smaller studios like Working Title which has released most Coen brothers' films and Miramax for *No Country for Old Men (2007)*. Yet, the Coens have remained "independent" and insist on total creative freedom (Merritt, 2000: 327-328).

The Coens manage to succeed in doing various things with their films. First, they make independent - yet sometimes commercially successful films - that show an unusual America, as far as contemporary cinema is concerned, to an international audience. Since they parody their country, their work / humor is much more appreciated in Europe, in America there is always someone who misunderstands or feels deeply insulted by it – whether Jews, Midwesterners or Californians. Second, at a national level they have given voice and presence to a reality that Hollywood film has often chosen to ignore. Their films portray layers of society that exist somewhat on the margins. While sometimes the

closure (when there is one, *Barton Fink* is lacking, for instance) of the films may fall within the mainstream (*Raising Arizona*, *Fargo, Intolerable Cruelty* and *The Big Lebowski*) even if only as an ironic representation of the romantic Hollywood melodrama, they still focus on heterogeneity, fragmentation and the crisis scenario of community. Ethan Coen sums up their aesthetic by quoting Sam Raimi: "the innocent must suffer, the guilty must be punished, you must drink blood to be a man" (Allen, 2006: 23).They depict regional narratives of individuals living the myths of America but also how these people never feel fulfilled within this capitalist system. According to Jonathan Romney, the "thing that properly seems bizarre about the brother's work is the breadth of their imagination: they specialize in pinpointing the kind of images and cultural references that are usually outside the remit of contemporary American cinema". (Allen, 2006:128)

2.2. The Coens as Postmodernist filmmakers

> *Blood Simple* proceeded in a more organized, more conscious fashion. We did not deal with the real Texas, but an artificial version of it, an assemblage of texts and mythologies. The subject is "deadly passion". There have been so many cases of this sort that have occurred in Texas that it has become a part of the public imagination. But what resulted from that was important to us because the film was imagined as a slice of life, a deliberate fiction that it was normal to set within an exotic locale. Joel Coen, interviewed in *Positif* (Allen, 2006: 26)

Blood Simple is Joel and Ethan Coen's first film and like most of their subsequent films it is difficult to characterize; it is an amalgam of genres (*film noir*, detective film, thriller or crime comedy, just to mention the most evident):

> The Coens occupy a particularly ambivalent position in the ranks of those post-modern film-makers who refuse to see any difference between genre and auteur films, or between high and popular culture. Their movies cannot be so unequivocally classed as 'art' as the films of David Lynch, nor do they have the cult status of the works of Quentin Tarantino. Their films initially appear more accessible to mainstream viewers than the works of other American 'post-modernists', but on closer inspection they turn out to be more complex and even more intellectual. (Körte & Seesslen, 1999: 224)

The Coen brothers take the myths propagated by mainstream American cinema, particularly that of Frank Capra, and turn them "upside down". Predominantly their work tends to reveal unusual "Americas": a world of nobodies, displaced people, natural born losers, or plain ordinary people who get into bizarre situations—the tortuous relationships of their society but also the diversity inherent in regional differences.

A common man's philosophy of life in the form of a voiceover opens their inaugural film *Blood Simple*:

> The world is full of complainers. But the fact is, nothing comes with a guarantee. I don't care if you're the Pope of Rome, President of the United States, or even Man of the Year--something can always go wrong.
>
> And go ahead, complain, tell your problems to your neighbor, ask for help--watch him fly. Now in Russia, they got it mapped out so that everyone pulls for everyone else--that's the theory, anyway. But what I know about is Texas... And down here... you're on your own.[1]

It sounds like a speech about the crude philosophy of individualism or just a plain irreligious view of the self, society and the world. Be that as it may, this small speech is of great significance for conceptualizing their subsequent film output, as well. As someone once said "What is most certain is uncertainty itself"; the fact that "something can always go wrong" gets a new self-conscious treatment by the Coens, especially in their handling of uncertainty and the irony of intentions, good or bad, because something always does go wrong although in a darkly comic way. Even when events turn deadly, the emphasis is kept on peculiar details allowing for the mood to remain light. Contrastively, *Magnolia* (Paul Thomas Anderson, 1999) comes to mind, where things go wrong in a pessimistic and humorless way, conveying the idea that there seems to be no hope left for mankind, irreconcilable traumas abound and a sick society drifts about. But what is most important in the films of the Coen Brothers is not simply the irony of accidental consequences running like a track throughout their films. Rather, it is the context within which these ironic consequences are set: the events unfold within a world of uncertainty, with the narratives drawing attention

[1] All film quotations are transcribed from *The Internet Movie Script Data Base*: http://www.imsdb.com

to the unlimited possibilities of human action and events. As Körte & Seesslen state “the bourgeois world produces irreconcilable contradictions which lead to crime and destruction” (177). Their stories observe how individuals and corporations in positions of power can never entirely control their environments. Indeed, instruments and technologies that enable the exercise of power (money, television, or guns) are made useless in the face of human unpredictability. Chance is universal; it is a fundamental fact of human life.

> In *Blood Simple*, [but in other films it is also evident, such as in *Burn after Reading* and *No Country for Old Men*] the universe is ruled by chance, not fate. Life is a gamble. Individual purpose and social order are functions that may dissolve at any moment in the face of uncertainty to reveal not the bleak determinism of late modernity but the dark humor of the postmodern absurdity of life. (Conard, 2009: 86)

Their films are difficult to characterize accurately not only because they draw upon the genres of *film noir*, comedy, the detective film, and the thriller but also because they are almost too obvious as well as critically postmodern in their self-reflexivity, their use of symbolism and omnipresent pastiche. Postmodernist film is self-reflexive in a manner that “it calls our attention to the way it has come into existence and to its own constructed nature” (Bertens, 2001: 141). The films constantly question the technique of film-making itself. They are self-reflexive in nature and the most obvious example of this is *The Hudsucker Proxy (1994)*. Self-conscious symbolism abounds in all their films: in *Blood Simple,* for example, the rotting fish on Marty’s desk, focused throughout the film, is the most obvious and direct symbol, as it signals that something is “fishy / stinks”, while at the same time it is an uncanny and haunting image.

Linda Hutcheon argues that parody in postmodernism is used to challenge dominant ideologies or historical representations through a type of irony, hence allowing us to subvert those ideologies and represent our distance from them. Parody also successfully raises questions about the uniqueness of representations, it increases our awareness of the fact that everything has once been produced or presented and we are now in an age of mere representation or reproduction, hence the abundant use of pastiche (1998: n.p.). Regarding this point, Hutcheon states that “parody is a perfect postmodernist form in some senses, for it paradoxically both incorporates and challenges that which it

parodies. It also forces a reconsideration of the idea of origin or originality that is compatible with other postmodernist interrogations of liberal humanist assumptions." (1987:251) The postmodern use of irony, and parody is depicted by the Coens through characters such as overweight, slimy Detective Visser in his sordid yellow suit (the opposite of Hollywood detectives) with his manipulated photographs of Ray and Abby in *Blood Simple;* seven month pregnant heavily clad police chief Marge Gunderson in *Fargo* (deconstructing the genre of the stereotypical macho cops and nasty villains from Hollywood films) or the alcoholic, foul-mouthed CIA agent Osborne Cox (deconstructing the myth of the elegantly dressed, intelligent spy of *The X-Files* and other TV provenances) in *Burn after Reading (2008)*. In the case of the Coens I would state that parody is used essentially as a tool for deconstruction of the American myths.

In Coen films reality seems to disperse, in stories within stories within stories. The use of camera is often paralleled with the technique of hypertextualization, which interrupts one story line to take over another, and another, and another. The attention of the spectator is focused on the digression of time, the excess of details, fragments become grandiose and acquire spectacular excessiveness inside the frame (Degli-Esposti, 1998:7). "Hierarchy, the order of things, is inverted: A detail becomes the most important element, and what is normally regarded as important is told merely *en passant*."(Körte & Seesslen, 1999:172) The melting glue and peeling wall-paper at the decomposing Earle Hotel in *Barton Fink (1991*) easily come to mind.
Fredric Jameson sums up these issues in a very good way:

> The postmodernisms have, in fact, been fascinated precisely by this whole "degraded" landscape of schlock and kitsch, of TV series and *Reader's Digest*, of advertising and motels, of the late show and the grade-B Hollywood film, of so-called paraliterature, with its airport paperback categories of the gothic and the romance, the popular biography, the murder mystery, and the science fiction or fantasy novel: materials they no longer simply "quote" as a Joyce or a Mahler might have done, but incorporate into their very substance." (1984: 63)

2.3. *Coenesque* Community

In this contemporary scenario, there is no suggestion of a moral society, everything has a price: whether passion, sex or revenge; money being the only motivation for many of the characters. On the other hand there is also no possibility of genuine social relationships, which makes actual community difficult: due to individuality, miscommunication and irresponsibility being abundant traits of this society. The Coen brothers create protagonists that try to achieve a coherent personal narrative and interpersonal communication but are systematically frustrated. They represent a condensed view of individuals who lack on a complete identity - adequate social development, a cultural context, and self-reflectiveness, for instance - and consequently on a sense of community or a sense of belonging. These factors make the characters alienated and cartoon-like, transients "in a minimalist theater of the absurd placed at the mercy of a postmodern fate" (Conard, 2009: 83). This is also portrayed through the fascination with movement, of being in transit. Even if they are not "on-the-road films"- the protagonist is on the move to discovery by car, tracking shots, wide and wild open spaces- the characters spend a lot of time on the road in *Blood Simple, Raising Arizona*, *Fargo* or *No Country for Old Men*. In *Fargo* and in *The Big Lebowski* there are various scenes where the characters are sitting in diners talking, but behind them the traffic is furiously rushing by, illustrating a mobile, unsatisfied society running out of time. While desire runs wild it also seems to be the only driving force that conducts these unfortunate people. They are constantly failing to understand and communicate with each other clearly. However, these eccentrics portray a desperate yearning for connection to others, I would say as a result of the crisis in community. Diverse patterns of displacement and several layers of (mis)communication are also depicted.

The argument in the Coens' *Blood Simple* develops around the protagonists' inability to communicate effectively, their private dialogues produce only suspicion and misunderstanding: each of the characters, although sharing a physical environment, occupies a distinct psychological and emotional space. (Coughlin, n.d.: 8) Later with *Fargo*, *The Big Lebowski, No Country for Old Men,* and *Burn After Reading,* the Coens broaden this philosophy of

miscommunication to an observable symptom of a crisis in community and in society at large. In particular they take the form of eccentric interpretations and aberrant desires that go unchecked by common sense or wider social sanction, as Linda and Chad discover in *Burn after Reading*. It is as if their characters suffer from tunnel vision, each gripped by an obsession he cannot explain.

Coen characters have internalized values and modes of perception from the surrounding popular culture (films, television, newspapers, computer networks, and roadside billboards), not from family or community. In *Burn After Reading*, Chad Feldheimer (Brad Pitt) tells his colleague Linda Litzke (Frances McDormand) to go on a blind date with someone because in the internet photo from "BeWithMeDC.com" he is wearing a Brioni suit, therefore he must not be a loser; of course he turns out to be exactly that, besides lacking any feelings or a capacity to communicate. In Independent cinema "the competent viewer is expected to appreciate the speed of the narrative [Cartoon-like] and the piling up of gags, and to be able to fill in any gaps with his or her knowledge of the genre" (Körte & Seesslen, 1999: 82), that is why the viewers' understanding of the story is similarly dependent on popular culture (even if the viewer does not know that a Brioni suit is a very good quality, expensive suit, worn by another media figure—007, he will probably guess the idea, however other references are not as obvious). According to Douglas McFarland, this "pleasure of pastiche is the pleasure of recognizing references, so that engaging a text becomes a game of identification. Moreover, through this consumption of cultural signs, there emerges in the audience a sense of belonging to an "exclusive community", one detached from both traditional socioeconomic classifications and conventional ethical codes". (Conard, 2009: 47).

Although there are multiple ways in which stories are told in the Coen brothers' films, they share a common concern for the crisis scenario of contemporary society. "As a reflection of our visual and confused society, postmodern films deliberately show their perplexed ways of telling stories through a disorienting use of editing. Fictional elements merge with the real people or facts…" (Degli-Esposti, 1998:12) The Coens exemplify with their grandmother's stories which were long accepted as true within the family but if checked did not stand up, although they served as guidance. According to Richard Gilmore, "nearly all of their movies tell stories that are unbelievable at

the literal level. It is certainly true that they are stories, but it is also true that they are in their own ways true stories, stories that reveal true things about the way the world is and about our ways of being in the world." (Conard, 2009: 76)

In *Raising Arizona* (1987) Edwina's (Holly Hunter) determination leads her to force Hi (Nicholas Cage) to perform his duty as a devoted husband: "You go right back up there and get me a toddler. I need a baby, Hi. They've got more than they can handle." Edwina's statement echoes a newspaper headline announcing the birth of the "Arizona Quints" – "'More than we can handle', laughs Dad." The connection between Edwina's choice of words and the press headline demonstrates how media culture often provides expressions that are used and abused to selfish ends. When Edwina borrows the newspaper's headline as a moral justification for kidnapping, the Coens are using the "difference of contexts" for satirical effect and cultural interrogation. Not only does this language acquisition reflect a reliance on the media for guidance, but it also demonstrates how the media constructs our reality, framing and editing it for us. Jean Baudrillard speaks of the culture of "hyper-reality" which is more real than reality itself. "The real is not only what can be reproduced, but *that which is always already reproduced,* the hyperreal" (2001:149).

Coen films frequently refer to this Baudrillardian hyper-reality and the impact that media culture has on peoples' lives. Media saturation results in people valuing spectacle and simulation over reality to the point where they come to identify themselves through mediated images. In *Burn After Reading*, Linda Litzke talks with Hardbodies' manager Ted Treffon (Richard Jenkins) about her obsession to have four aesthetic surgeries (liposuction, fat reduction, breast-augmentation and facial tuck):

TED You're a beautiful woman! You don't need…

LINDA Ted, I have gone just as far as I can go with this body! I----

TED I think it's a very beautiful----it's not a phoney-baloney Hollywood body-

LINDA That's right, Ted, I would be laughed out of Hollywood. I have very limited breasts and a gi-normous ass and I have this gut that swings back and forth in fronta me like a shopping cart with a bent wheel.

TED Oh come on!

LINDA I am trying to get back in circulation. I have appetites and so

forth, and, uh----

TED Well there's a lot of guys who'd like you just the way you are.

LINDA Yeah----losers!

In Coen films people do not see what is right in front of them, instead they have absurd aspirations. Of course it is important to recognize the significance of the imaginary social worlds formed through the media, but it is even more so to question the values which these fantasies support and promote. In most of their films, as I will discuss, there are many scenes portraying alienated people watching television, absorbing images and models on which they will base their constructions of identity. Furthermore, their use of non-linear narratives, verbal and visual jokes, irony, parody, cartoon-like speed, and pastiche suggest that life, like television, may constantly be reconstructed.

Douglas Kellner suggests that Baudrillard's mass media culture has resulted in people valuing imagined stories and simulation over reality and in fact not being able to determine the difference. He states that this culture: "[traps] them in a universe of simulacra in which it is impossible to distinguish between the spectacle and the real and in which individuals come to prefer spectacle to 'reality'". (1989: 70-71) At the beginning of *Fargo*, there is a claim stating that the film is based on a "true story" (another strategy exposed shortly after the film's debut). Yet this claim "catapults us right into the middle of Coen County, that curious place where the simple, the straightforward, and the commonplace sit with the complicated, the enigmatic, and the distorted". (Körte & Seesslen, 1999: 171)

Intolerable Cruelty also demands how we know what is true, what really is true. Furthermore, it actually asks if we even care enough to try to distinguish. After listening to Bonnie Donaly's (Stacy Travis) version of the events surrounding her cheating on her husband Donovan Donaly (Geoffrey Rush) with the pool cleaner, Miles Massey (George Clooney)—the persuasively eloquent, clichéd divorce lawyer (also creator of the Massey Pre-Nup)—explains to her that the "truth is so self-evident" that he will "be able to make it equally as transparent to any jury." But Miles must first decide upon which "transparent truth" he should give to the jury. Maybe Donovan's spousal abuse drove Bonnie to another man's arms; or it could be that in fact Bonnie rescued Donovan from killing the pool cleaner; probably the best option is the one where Donovan and

Ollie Olerud (Jack Kyle), the pool cleaner, are the ones who are actually having an affair. In the end, Miles chooses the last story, the one most likely to guarantee him success. For Miles, it is not authenticity but plausibility that is important. It does not matter, in short, if a story is true; what matters is that people believe it. The imagined stories can be more persuasive than reality. Also in *The Man Who Wasn't there* (2001) this concern has been broached, another manipulative lawyer, Freddy Riedenschneider (Tony Shalhoub), chooses the story that is most likely to promise him victory:

> **Ed** I killed him.
>
> **Freddy** Okay, you killed him. Okay, we forget the blackmail. You killed him. How come?
>
> **Ed** He and Doris were having an affair.
>
> **Freddy** Okay. How did you know?
>
> **Ed** I just knew. A husband knows.
>
> **Freddy** Will anyone else say they knew? And don't say your wife.
>
> **Ed** No, I don't think so. . . .
>
> **Freddy** Will anyone corroborate any goddamn part of your story at all? Come on, people. You can't help each other like that. . . . Let's be realistic. I cannot present Story A. I cannot present Story B. . . . Forget the jealous husband thing. We're going with the blackmail.

People want a believable story, not a complex one, even if it is true. Simulations, in other words, can be more plausible, more persuasive, than the truth. This might be interpreted as cautionary. In the end Riedenschneider proffers a lengthy speech about the impossibility of knowing anything at all as his defense:

> Ya can't know the reality of what happened, or what 'would've' happened if you hadden a stuck in your goddamn schnozz. So there 'is' no 'what happened.' Not in any sense that we can grasp with our puny minds. Because our minds . . . our minds get in the way. Looking at something changes it. They call it the 'Uncertainty Principle.' Sure, it sounds screwy, but even Einstein says the guy's on to something. Science. Perception. Reality. Doubt. Reasonable doubt. I'm saying that sometimes the more you look, the less you really know. It's a fact. . . . In a way, it's the only fact there is.

As Tiffany Joseph suggests, “seeing reality involves reading it through fantasy: seeing well means understanding or at least questioning how the imaginary touches the real and the way it affects truth.” To see only the fantastic or only the real is to see incompletely, in order to see better, one must observe the space where they merge and eventually blur. It is, in other words, to understand the way that *Fargo* is, indeed, a “true story”. The Coen brothers’ films suggest that it is exactly at this intersection of the real and the fantastic that the world which surrounds us can better be interpreted (2008: 111). As some argue, there is no actual truth; there are only versions of it. Körte and Seesslen state that the Coens’ “work on myth is limitless: the individual, the familial, the social, the historical and the transcendental are struck against each other to such an extent that the construct within them becomes visible –reality itself” (1999:230).

3. Growing up in America - Film and historical influences

3.1. Capra’s reading of America

Frank Capra’s specialness and importance in traditional American cinema influenced many generations of film enthusiasts. The Coen brothers are no exception, they grew up watching films from the thirties, forties and fifties. They are fascinated by them and like to look at American life through the lens of earlier genre films (whether *noir*, crime or comedy). They especially enjoyed Preston Sturges’ and Frank Capra’s films, to pay homage to and parody, while simultaneously drawing new meanings from them. *The Hudsucker Proxy*, while superficially a “screwball comedy”, is a Frank Capraesque fairytale with similar themes to *It’s a Wonderful Life* (1946) and the Coens characteristically put the theme of suicide at the very center of their homage to Capra. But in addition to that, it is a satire of Hollywood: producer of fairytales, each one fitted with a happy ending, to reassure the “common man” that he really is a fine human being - much better than the corpulent, rich, cynical people who make all the money. The major character in *The Hudsucker Proxy* is really the Big City.

The juxtaposition between Country and City and the condemnation of the Big City, already portrayed in the silent movies of the 1920s, became more

explicit in the 1930s. The director which has made a more extensive use out of this conceptual contrast is Frank Capra. His work engages with the foundational myths of American culture. The old favourite Horatio Alger myth seems to offer people the prospect of achieving success through hard work, irrespective of religion, race or history. But this relentless pursuit of the American dream becomes easily entwined with materialism and greed. Obviously the worst qualities of the dream are not portrayed by those of small town provenance but by the corpulent, rich and powerful city dwellers. Capra endorsed the dominant (at the time) ideological myth of America as a “melting pot” but he did this with tunnel vision. Capra subscribed to the idea that American society was sick, threatened by the emergence of insincere, careless, and morally irresponsible rich people which needed to be checked by the wider community.

People during the Depression felt they had lost the possibility of achieving the American dream of upward mobility. As most critics would agree, Capra’s films catered to this feeling of loss: society was ailing and the small town communities would save it. Besides which they gave Americans a pleasing and convincing image of themselves, thus his work was popular until the Second World War because it corresponded to the audiences wishes and views. “Capra’s rise to fame and material success stemmed from America’s descent into the Great Depression, as he somewhat uncomfortably assumed the role of Hollywood’s champion of the “common man”” (McBride, 1992: 219). Capra felt the Depression made him take a long and “hard look at life from the eyelevel of the hard-pressed Smiths and Joneses...It was not the same rosy life we saw—and copied—in each other’s Hollywood movies.” He felt “the world was hungry for a lift...That was my needed job: lift the human spirit.” (Capra, 1971:137).

Charles Maland states that Capra's Depression films "celebrate the common life of Americans and belittle the life of leisure…such a position...is much more therapeutic than radical. It makes us happy that we're poor and serene rather than rich and alienated." However, here I would disagree because Capra’s films celebrate decency grounded in small town community life, not poverty, which does not figure much in his films. He even goes so far as to say that “images like Capra's portrayals of America helped recreate faith in the system" (1980:86) which was what President Franklin D. Roosevelt prescribed

for the times with the New Deal's economic programs (implemented in the United States between 1933 and 1936). America's dire need of change was what emerged from the Depression. And Capra is the New Deal auteur *par excellence*; he gives people hope during and after the Great Depression.

Generally speaking, his films tend to show the conflict between a Catholic moral view—"the little good guy"—and the capitalistic and selfish worldview of the corpulent and rich old villains. Capra's popular films endorsed the defence of the "common man". Indeed, Capra's "common man" is a *man*. While his women may be strong characters, matching their male protagonists and frequently the agents of their redemption, the focus of his concern is the man - the more complex the male hero, the less interesting and complicated is his female partner (Mortimer, 1994: 3). By contrast, in Coen films it is the women who act - women's paths are straight, they know what they pursue, while men tend to go around in circles: they move around themselves, and inevitably end up going nowhere. A clear example of this is *Raising Arizona* where the main character's (Hi) aspirations for improvement are quintessentially American in nature and he is also a "common man", an ex-convict. His name is meaningful as it is really a joke, almost a reminder: Hi, as in high expectations, very American ambitions, which he, and life, cannot measure up to - the first image we see of Hi, he is standing against a height measure. Although Hi is the protagonist, it is Edwina, who engages the action of the film with her strong sense of what she wants and what constitutes natural justice, Hi McDunnough (like his surname seems to convey) limits himself to going around in circles: the package of Pampers which he meant to buy, but ended up stealing, was still standing exactly where he dropped it after many misadventures. All their hopes are frustrated (family, marriage, jobs) but they can still dream of better endings. "What the Coen brothers hint at in a number of their noir films they explicitly embrace in *Raising Arizona*: the resilience of human nature's basic instincts, not the instincts for lust and domination of others, but those for love, affection, and procreation, instincts that steer human beings toward a happy ending, in spite of the damage done and the detours caused by their calculative misjudgments". (Conard, 2009: 39)

Frank Capra also showed audiences about basic human instincts. Through his "morality fairytales" he demonstrated that poverty and cruelty do

not have to go together and are not necessarily linked to moral weakness. Capra did this by giving voice to men who can act well regardless of powerful outside pressures not to. His protagonists are generally thrown into the system to expose its evils. They are usually innocent outsiders coming from a small town, more often than not with humorous traits and they are dropped by chance in the midst of a coldblooded world they had no idea existed. For example, naïve Mr. Smith (James Stewart) arriving in Washington D.C. uses his pigeons to send messages home to mom. Coen heroes are at first sight also immature idealists who are thrown into a situation which forces them to confront violence and corruption yet they behave differently from John Doe or Jefferson Smith, they are contaminated by power, they become corrupt. Those who think that they can outsmart the system usually end up falling victim to it, like Barton Fink or Tom Reagan (*Miller's Crossing*, 1990). They all start out with big ideas but most of the time they are so far-fetched that they do not seem to be entirely of this world. Coen male characters are like children who have not been properly prepared for life, neither by family nor community. What they do is normally not what they had planned. They are unaware of their own ability to cause disasters and unable to deal with the destructive potential of the people with whom they come into contact. Coen heroes are also different from Capra's because they can achieve neither the dignity of self-sufficiency nor the security of community. They cannot become the subjects of their own stories. They do not act, they react. (Körte & Seesslen, 1999: 251-252)

As was mentioned before, Capra thrived on the contrast of the small town (with its wholesome virtue) to the big city, with its affluence, corruption and vice, but in reality very few of Capra's films are actually set in small town America. The small town functions as an idea, a myth, it is where the hero comes from; its values become part of his character. Capra's hero does not have to be in a fixed place, he can be on the road (such as Peter Warne/Clark Gable) or even in the big city (like Mr. Smith/James Stewart) his values are settled in him, thus he is able to convert people. According to McBride, although Capra himself prospered in the competitive atmosphere of the city, he shared with the populists a belief in what Hofstader called in *The Age of Reform* "the agrarian myth...a kind of homage that Americans have paid to the fancied innocence of their origins... [which] perhaps relieved some residual feelings of

guilt at having deserted parental homes and childhood attachments"(1992:253). By 1945, most Americans lived in or near cities.

In *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, naïve, and provincial idealist Jefferson Smith, clearly the populist, fights to expose the governmental corruption in Washington. Through his speeches, Capra, aided by the leftist Sydney Buchman, celebrates the individual, the family and community, but also the need for social change, if faith in America is to be recovered. By 1939 the Spanish Civil War (1936-39), which served as a prelude to the upcoming World War II, was drawing to an end. A sense of difficult and dark times ahead helped colour Mr. Smith's speech:

> I guess this is just another lost cause, Mr. Paine. All you people don't know about the lost causes. Mr. Paine does. He said once they were the only causes worth fighting for. And he fought for them once, for the only reason that any man ever fights for them. Because of just one plain, simple rule: "Love thy neighbour." And in this world today, full of hatred, a man who knows that one rule has a great trust.

Nevertheless, that is what community is about, caring about your neighbor. As a rule, Capra's films celebrate the worth of the values associated with life in a community—solidarity and selflessness. Lee Lourdeaux in *Italian and Irish Filmmakers in America*, states that Capra's communities are fundamental to the social vision of the Catholic Church: Families, neighborhoods, and small organizations provide protection against despotism (1990: 137) and Kafkaesque soulless bureaucracy. A joyful sense of community, of belonging to something larger than oneself, is at the heart of Capra's mature works (from *Mr. Deeds, 1936* until *It's a Wonderful Life, 1946)*. And communitarianism is at the heart of America's small town values. The pursuit of happiness among friends and community is more laudable than the calculated world of the alienating city. After seeing what life would have been like had he never been born, George Bailey (James Stewart) in *It's a Wonderful Life*, comes to understand the nature of friendship, trust and service to the community when most of the population of Bedford Falls helps him out. The Coen brothers believe in the importance of community, and perhaps even feel a certain nostalgia for a more harmonious past, yet they also realize it is anything but perfect and even unrecoverable.

Intimately related to this idea of community is the idea of mediation. In Capra's stories, the hero (Jefferson Smith, Grandpa Vanderhof and George Bailey) usually functions as a mediator between the needs of the community and the greedy powerful few (Jim Taylor, Mr. Kirby and Mr. Potter). Mr. Smith is "crucified" by the ruthless politicians. Capra said on several occasions that the underlying idea for these Depression movies was actually the Sermon on the Mount. Thus, these stories reflect the trajectory of the classic messianic figure: sometimes complete with Calvary agonies, the hero goes from passion and death to resurrection (a.k.a. humiliation, struggle and inner resolution) a formula that an Italian immigrant like Capra would know much about. Nonetheless, a closer look at his films confirms that the "little people" do not always win the battle. They are sometimes crushed by the powerful few or bought off. Capra realized that the victory of good over evil is never a sure thing. Evil in Coen films exists in different forms: power deeply rooted in society normally in the form of fat (in visual arts, corpulence is usually associated with greed and corruption) old men with cigars, as in Capra films; in the struggles of the younger protagonist in confrontation with the older man; and through unreal murderous monsters which come into being (such as "the lonely rider of the Apocalypse" in *Raising Arizona* or Anton Chigurh in *No Country for Old Men*). All the ill-prepared and feeble heroes want something for which they must challenge authority, but they never get what they want. In Coen films "the fairytale doesn't come to the man to save him, as in Capra's films, but to devour him and then spit him out. The fairytale exists and it is beautiful, but it brings neither redemption nor explanation." (Körte & Seesslen, 1999: 218) Sometimes signs in Coen films might point to paradise, but it is unattainable. For instance, Hi's marriage to Ed (in *Raising Arizona*) seems to have a salutary effect, to redeem him from a life of crime, but only until Ed is diagnosed as sterile and they decide to kidnap one of Nathan Arizona's quintuplets (they follow a twisted acknowledgment of the meaning of familial love/bonds).

Another central theme in Capra's films is his patriotism, his belief in the American dream which accepts American exceptionalism. America has believed itself exceptional since the time of the Puritans, as early as 1630, in a famous sermon given by John Winthrop, where he describes a future for America in which "wee will be seen as a city upon a hill." (n.p.)This is aspirational, for it

expresses a dream of what America could be. Capra's films cater to this patriotic myth: Americans stand together as common men and women who care about each other, and respect each other although coming from widely different backgrounds. They join together with a common cause and shared patriotism that form what they believe to be, "American exceptionalism". It is no wonder Capra films make Americans "feel good". Contrastively, the Coen brothers portray the deep deceptions in the American mythos of self-creation, deceptions about the irrelevance of the conditions of one's birth, the role of social class, money, or race. Life in America, or history, has deconstructed Capra's myths: the Coens record the consequences of this.

Capra is most widely known as a populist, an 'arch crowd pleaser'. As many commentators have stated, a recurring theme in his films is that crowds can become irrational, making individuals surrender their individuality, their independent thinking. However, his films also tend to depict the ability of the individual to make a difference – he relentlessly substantiates the "special" individual - revealing a certain resistance to politics. In Capra's films, political and economic issues tend to be moralized; he is primarily a filmmaker of the personal and the moral. Again, in *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, which is obviously concerned with the democratic process and its corruption, the focus is on the emotional and moral issues facing his central characters. Although the Coens cannot be referred to as committed to a political analysis of American culture, unlike their contemporary John Sayles, they do question the acceptance of the social and economic policy of Ronald Reagan, for instance. In *Raising Arizona* when Hi says, "I tried to stand up and fly straight, but it wasn't easy with that sumbitch Reagan in the White House…I dunno, they say he is a decent man, so …maybe his advisers are confused," it is funny and echoes true all at the same time. However, it also has a vaguely socialist ring to it, and of course Pete Seeger, the creator of the "Goofing Off Suite" which serves as background music was a famous socialist (Conard, 2009: 9), which might suggest some deeper political message behind all the craziness.

Even Capra's harshest critics acknowledge his ability and success in dealing with the 1930's unsophisticated audiences' deep desires. Frank Capra's techniques worked well to captivate audiences, as did his style of capturing American ideals. Capra's films found their moral center in a Horatio Alger(-ism)

that valorized hard work, endurance and resolution as well as psychic and civic wholeness, which reformed the foundational American myth of the self-made man. Capra, while showing the social relationships, dramatized over and over again, his belief in the familial community and respect for individual virtues by appealing directly to man's better nature. Movies which make a statement about standing up for what you believe and thereby "achieving what one wants" are referred to as "Capraesque" or "Capracorn", even if this last is used in a denigratory way.

Coenesque comedy, on the other hand, is where dark, violent and subversive laughs abound and even seem to rule. The viewer does not expect to "feel good" after watching a Coen film, instead he expects images and archetypes to be parodied and questioned. Crime comedies which mock the "American way of life" can hardly be loved by mainstream American audiences. Popular culture does not like satire. All the craziness of life in America - how buying a package of Pampers can become a race for life because of America's love of guns (*Raising Arizona*) - might be fun and even ring true, but it will not make Americans "feel good" about themselves. I find that the Coens are more comprehensible to Europeans because they already see America as something peculiar. Another factor which should be taken into account is that independent cinema in America is partly subsidized by Europe. The Coen Brothers departure from the conventional Hollywood formulas and motifs that define the studio system - their pronounced cultural radicalism - is frequently associated with a cruel social critique, which appeals mostly to counterculture audiences. Beginning with *Blood Simple,* most of the films the Coens have made since tell the stories of those who fail to realize the American dream of upward mobility. I believe that in doing so they reproduce the popular mood of anxiety, uncertainty, and isolation mirrored in community life and in society in general.

3.2. Between Capra and the Coens

Frank Capra made his last important film (in 1946) during the decade dominated by World War II. Many European artists and intellectuals fled to the United States from the war then, taking with them new cultural influences. The women began to work outside of the home in order to replace the men who had

gone off to war, finally getting a taste of independence and divorce became more frequent. The men who returned found that rural life was no longer an ideal; there was an exodus to the cities. After the War, the fight for civil rights began. During the 1950s, television became the dominant form of entertainment illustrating false ideals: the model family, living in the single-family home, in the ideal community was watched and copied by thousands of viewers. This was also a very conservative epoch. In this decade both Coens were born into a Jewish household outside of Minneapolis, in 1954, Joel and three years later Ethan. As children, they have often confessed, they found growing up in the American heartland boring. They compensated by watching a lot of old films on television and began producing their first remakes/films together.

Towards the end of the decade, the population started to feel the real effects of the “post-war boom”. Financial prosperity among American families became a common reality, mirroring habits and ways of life where the possession of material goods was a condition *sine qua non* for upward mobility and gaining social status. The movement away from the conservative fifties continued and eventually resulted in revolutionary ways of thinking and real change in the cultural fabric of American life. The clearest example of the climate of anti-capitalist contestation installed among the younger generations is given by the Vietnam War, which began in 1965. With the war in full progress--the first transmitted live by television--the protests against the action of the United States in Vietnam become international. From the 1960s onwards the United Sates was forced to adopt a conflicting model of social organization. The fight for civil rights and the Vietnam conflict divided America. For the previously mentioned reasons, an unfixable divide opened up during the thirty years’ time between the fifties and the late seventies.

By 1980 a new conservatism, called the "New Right" had emerged. That same year the New Right offered as candidate, Ronald Reagan. He tried to revive the Cold War anticommunism feeling of the 1950s - it was easier to focus on communism than in the Middle East conflict or in terrorism. Reagan attempted to revive Capra’s ideology (family values, Horatio “Algerism”, hard work, small town communities and optimism) but this was no longer possible as Americans had begun to question cultural certainties. Americans were unwilling to give up the gains of the 1960s and 1970s. Politics and film production seem

to go hand in hand and answer to each other. Significantly, the President, an actor from the classic studio area, asked Americans and America to be represented to the world as powerful and united. In his 1986 State of the Union Address, he stated "Never has there been a more exciting time to be alive, a time of rousing wonder and heroic achievement. As they said in the film *Back to the Future*, 'Where we're going, we don't need roads'" (Dirks, 1986: n.p.) *Back to the Future* (1985) is a film with similar themes to Frank Capra's *It's a Wonderful Life*. In contrast, the incompetent and unsatisfied protagonists of Coen films inhabit an America where everyone is "on their own" and their schemes for self-improvement come to nothing as something "always goes wrong."

Already in 1984 mainstream Hollywood had provided a rural trilogy *Country, Places in the Heart*, and *The River* which promoted the idea that people who work the land are uplifted by their struggle and hold together the embattled American family by devotion to their property (savings and loans scandal as background-reminiscent of the Depression). This split between good farmers and bad city dwellers takes an extreme form in *Witness (1985)* which builds up the contrast between the devout, gentle Amish and the greedy, brutal Philadelphians. *Witness* takes the previously mentioned trilogy one step further by having its farming people be part of a pacifist religious community that stresses "plainness." (Kael, 1985: 78) For all of the conservative rhetoric of the Reagan administration, the period was marked by scandals that called their credibility and sincerity into question. This state of affairs helped provide a fertile soil for the Coen Brothers' career to flourish.

3.3. What has become of Myths?

In *Raising Arizona,* after Hi holds up the convenience store when he needs diapers, Ed argues with him stating that this style of shopping for Pampers has nothing to do with "family life", to which Hi replies "no, this is certainly not family life as seen on television." Through these moments of lucidity the Coens deal with popular culture, its images and archetypes: it exists, it cannot be avoided, and thus it is best to be "Swiftian" satirists (it makes for many jokes). As Körte and Seesslen state "If it is true that the Coens developed their cinema aesthetic merely to be able to crack a few private jokes,

then we shouldn't forget that these jokes are about things as fundamental as birth, death, religion and love." (1999: 240)

The Coen brothers are experts in the area of Americana. Regarding this, Tom Shone writes in *The Guardian* that "the Coens have been quietly wallpapering their homeland…They've covered New York in the 1950s (*The Hudsucker Proxy*), Los Angeles in the 1940s (*Barton Fink*), Mississippi in the 1930s (*Oh Brother, Where Art Thou?*) and 1990s (*The Ladykillers*), Texas in the 1980s twice (*Blood Simple and No Country for Old Men*), Minnesota in the 1960s (*A Serious Man)* and 1990s (*Fargo*), not to mention Arizona, Washington, North Dakota, Santa Rosa and now [*True Grit*], for good measure, Arkansas in the 1880s." (2011: n.p.)

The images and archetypes through which America presents itself to the contemporary world originate from many sources. After September 11, 2001 the tendency has been for American popular culture to move towards more traditional images and archetypes, as might be expected. The Coens thrive on deconstructing and parodying these images because they are still cherished by Americans. For instance, the myth of rural virtue and urban vice persists regardless of the changes in the political landscape. This nostalgia for the virtues of small town life appeals to Americans, otherwise the Coen brothers would not play so much with these archetypes, yet "the dismantling of myth in Coen films is not merely an aesthetic revolt, it is an experiment with the American dream, with the dream of capitalism, the dream of moving from one social situation to another" (Körte & Seesslen, 1999: 264), of not being satisfied or ever feeling fulfilled by life in that capitalistic system.

Another clear example of America's belief in the myths propagated by popular culture is represented by their super hero projection. Superman provides the best example of one classic American archetype. He is the small town boy who comes to the big city to make a place for himself, yet never forgets his roots. He is the self-made man (constituted from Horatio Alger and the Protestant work ethic) who does not become corrupted. He was raised in Smallville, the mythical small town, yet he must prove his worth in the city, Metropolis - the names have obvious connotations- is the largest city in the world and has the crime and vice associated with the city. Superman is tested not only for his physical skill, but for his morals as well. His body, as well as his

mind, is up to the challenge. Like a Capra hero, he is able to triumph uncorrupted over the powers of the large city. These superheroes saturate American popular culture and abound in what many critics have come to call a cinema of infantilizing entertainment. All Coen male protagonists try to be heroic although somewhere along the line, through ironic reversals and comic misfortunes, they are doomed to failure and end up looking more like cartoon characters instead (like Wile E. Coyote or Daffy Duck, obsessed with trying - oblivious to limitations - constantly failing). But of course their work on myth goes much further than that, particularly since their films often illustrate the moral dangers posed by "unchecked individualism".

The frontiersman in the form of David Crocket, Paul Bunyan (in *Fargo*) the American pioneer background represented by Jean's father (Wade Gustafson – the younger Harve Presnell was such a frontier-town builder in *Paint your Wagon* (1969)), the cowboy voice-over and the old Lebowski character in *The Big Lebowski* are all satirized by the Coens. However, this conquest of the *Wild West* has helped to frame how America sees itself in the world. *No Country for Old Men* gives a perspective on the new west – the border land with Mexico is the new Wild West – where there is too much money, too much greed, and too many guns and killings abound, resulting from the industrialization of drug production and distribution.

That the Coens delight in playing with American archetypes and metaphors is evident in their portrayal of everything American. *Fargo*'s "Americana" is present in the "Minnesota Nice" accent, which also provides a sense of community; the golf toys and matching pencils adorning Jerry Lundegaard's office; the galoshes and grocery paper bags that accompany him even to the crime scene; the bag of Old Dutch Potato Chips sharing the bed with Marge and her husband; and the Swanson's frozen dinner eaten by Grimsrud from a TV tray. In *The Big Lebowski* "Americana" is depicted in the Dude's whole persona, the Hawaiian shirts, wearing a bathrobe and jellies to a convenience store, the bamboo Tiki bar and the bathroom fixtures in his bungalow; the old Lebowski's office wall covered with his medals of achievement, his photo taken with Nancy Reagan, Brant telling the Dude "Mr. Lebowski is in seclusion in the west wing" (of course, the presidential offices of the white house are in the west wing); and in the Folgers coffee can where they

store Donny's ashes; yet the sex offender Jesus somewhat undermines this, as does Walter's over-competitive nature and Vietnam apologetics. In spaghetti western characters (such as Gale and Evelle) and people living in trailers in *Raising Arizona* but also in their choice of the once popular Western as a favorite genre, Americana lingers on, like it does in *No Country for Old Men,* where the settings and protagonists are American: purposefully Uncle Ellis, as a representative of the last frontiersman, is in a deplorable physical state as is his house.

"As "Regional Independents" Joel and Ethan Coen have spread their film wings right across the extensive lands of the United States… The Coens have acquired a reputation for a certain kind of ethnographic expression, exploring the specific factors that contribute to defining particular cultures." (Coughlin, 2005: 10). To make this absolutely clear, I have constructed a complete table of Coen story locations and times (see below). In drawing attention to the fabric of community it seems pertinent to study stories that seem to capture particular cultural patterns. Accordingly, it makes sense to examine communitarian practices as they are realized, in community. As many of their films are period studies, taking place earlier in the century, they represent past communities, and it seems more relevant, from my perspective, to focus on contemporary communities. Since community and crisis are more visible in near present-day communities, besides the time factor, I also choose to focus my attention on locations which are best known to the Coen brothers (where they grew up and where they have lived). For this and previously-mentioned reasons, I have chosen to focus my attention mostly on discussion of the following three films, since they seem, from my perspective, the most representative of contemporary community and crisis: *Fargo* (1996); *The Big Lebowski* (1998); *No Country for Old Men* (2007).

Time Period and Location depicted

Film	Time	Location
Blood Simple	1980's	Texas
Raising Arizona	1980's	Arizona
Miller's Crossing	1930's	Northern New Jersey
Barton Fink	1941	Hollywood, California
The Hudsucker Proxy	1958	New York City
Fargo	1990's	Minnesota and N. Dakota
The Big Lebowski	1991	Los Angeles, California
O Brother, Where Art Thou?	1930's	Mississippi
The Man Who Wasn't There	1949	Santa Rosa, California
Intolerable Cruelty	2002/3	Los Angeles, California
The Ladykillers	1990's	Mississippi
No Country for Old Men	1980	West Texas/Mexico
Burn After Reading	2008	Washington, D.C.
A Serious Man	1967	Minnesota
True Grit	1880's	Arkansas

Chapter Two: *Fargo* (1996)

A community but at a price

Many critics seemed to view the film as a satire of a community but I would say it is more a contrast of two opposite worlds. In *Fargo,* Joel and Ethan Coen create and contrast two worlds which they situate in the northern Midwest, mainly Minnesota, the brothers' home state. As in many Frank Capra melodramas, there is an archetypal, rural "community" in which an apparently harmonious order prevails. Against this is set an urban society shaped by the corporate, media-driven, materialistic atmosphere in which money and status are the ultimate goals, creating a world of isolation, cruel violence, material greed and the resulting anarchy. The similarities with Capra end here. The two worlds contrasted have one characteristic in common, a bitter and cruel cold. The realism is reinforced by the statement "This is a true story" but also by the dimly lit places, the "undecorated sets" (outside shades of grey -- inside shades of brown) and by the filming on real locations: "oppressive and dramatic landscapes" and "flat desolate stretches of land" is what the Coens want to convey and succeed in doing so. "What is striking in Minnesota," Ethan Coen states in an interview for *The Guardian*, "is the invisible horizon line. On a grey day, when there's snow on the ground, the sky and the ground are one tone. Everyone appears to be hanging in mid-air." (Shone, *2011: n.p.*) This could also be interpreted as a metaphor for the film: a road where you cannot distinguish the earth from the sky could mean, telling the difference between truth and fiction or right from wrong. Ghostly and desolate is the image that lingers in the viewer's mind, even the roads seem to disappear, swallowed up by all that cold, white snow. As the title also suggests, there is a sense of endless distance and unconquered territory (Western-like: *Wells, Fargo and Company*), but the title is misleading as well, because only the first four minutes of the film take place in Fargo (North Dakota), the rest of it is set in Minnesota. And none of the scenes, either exterior or interior, were actually filmed in Fargo. Yet the title of the film is "about something beyond geography" as Janet Maslin states in her article for *The New York Times*: it is more about "testing limits, breaking boundaries, going too far" (1996, n.p.) all connote distance - how far the characters in each world must go to travel to each other's worlds. About halfway between the two

cities (geographically about 200 km apart from each city) is a community called Brainerd, yet worlds apart as far as communities go. Brainerd is a community founded on relationships / bonding as embodied in its pregnant police chief, Marge Gunderson (Frances McDormand). Throughout the film Marge protects Brainerd from invasion by the amorality that results in the anarchy of Fargo and Minneapolis. That protection, however, comes at a price, both to the community and to Marge herself. Brainerd maintains its order and values intact at the expense of a certain unworldliness and dullness, and Marge, to protect Brainerd and to remain a member of it, must venture into, but ultimately reject, a more potentially stimulating world.

In *Fargo*, the world outside of Brainerd is characterized as dangerous to its citizens because community is in crisis. As a result, there abounds a lack of communication, love, support and trust. Contrastively, Brainerd is portrayed as a harmonious community in which citizens protect and care for each other as a result of shared values. However, the film suggests, by means of scenes set in both worlds, that Brainerd pays a price in order to achieve this harmony, a timeless comic dull stupidity, where ignorance is a virtue. Even in the Coen's choice of music this is illustrated, as Greg Hainge states in his article entitled "The Unbearable Blandness of Being: The Everyday and Muzak in *Barton Fink* and *Fargo*" – Muzak – is numbing music, which produces "on the individual the everyday processes of alienation as it dismantles collectivity and replaces it with the semblance of communion the everyday affords" (2008:43).

Community in Crisis - outside of Brainerd

Jerry Lundegaard (William H. Macy) hires two criminals, Carl Showalter (Steve Buscemi) and Gaear Grimsrud (Peter Stormare) to kidnap his wife Jean (Kristin Rudrüd) in order to get the ransom money from his rich but avaricious father-in-law. The criminals complain throughout because Lundegaard does not want to keep the pre-agreed payment arrangements, keeping the woman hostage is not a sound financial investment and they believe he does not need the ransom money. The fact that they are all committing a crime is totally irrelevant and never crosses their minds or conversations. In America a murder takes place every half hour, the film is at 32.5 minutes when the first murder

takes place (Seller, 2004: 10). By the end of the film the criminals have committed seven murders: first, a highway policeman; next, two would–be witnesses driving by; fourth, Lundegaard's father-in-law; fifth, the parking lot attendant; sixth, Jean Lundegaard; and finally, Gaear kills Carl because he interrupts his soap opera (the only time he shows some emotion during the whole film) and they disagree over the splitting up of the cars.

Even if the worst crimes in the film are committed by the two crooks, Jerry Lundegaard does not have a clean slate either: stolen cars; defrauding his company of $320,000 and using non-existent vehicles as collateral. Apparently he has already stolen from Gustafson (Harve Presnell), his father-in-law and owner of the dealership, and feels he has to continue doing so for appearances' sake; Jerry constantly cheats customers just to make more money on a sale. Where thrillers and crime films usually portray criminals as men of cruel powers and detectives corresponding, *Fargo* has police, villains and victims who appear to be a bit slow in the head. They seem to match the pace of the film, as well as the landscape where they move: empty, vast and flat. Yet they are in sync with other Coen characters: ordinary people with dumb pigheadedness who are unable to recognize the gravity of situations. Adding to that the traits attributed to Midwesterners of Nordic descent (politeness, reserve, refusal to show the least emotion and the constant avoidance of all confrontation) and the murders start to add up in a cartoonish way.

> All these scenes are carried off in the same deadpan style by characters obsessed with the Coyotean [characters like Road Runner and Wile E. Coyote] question of how to carry out their individual plans yet trapped in a universe utterly indifferent to their cares. Because they are so oblivious to their own limitations or the plans of others, both the violence and the comedy of the film erupt with shocking suddenness. (Leitch, 2002: 282)

The Coens seem to be asking what happens to a society in which self-centered people drift about completely oblivious to the needs of others. The world outside of Brainerd, as imagined by the Coens, has destroyed its communal nature through fragmentation of its inhabitants. The only rule shared by them is the pursuit of self-interest, represented in their ruthless chase after money, and the only interpersonal relationship recognized within the family is the "kidnapping", in which individuals use others as instruments to enrich themselves. Its

members are unable to communicate because of the corruption of language in service of this way of life.

The film begins with a conversation in a bar, where the kidnapping deal is negotiated. The hired kidnappers, who are not too bright, sense the absurdity of what they are engaging in and briefly try to communicate this to Jerry Lundegaard, that is, they are curious about the motives that have led Jerry to plot to kidnap his own wife, but they lack the social skill and pertinacity necessary to do this:

> **CARL** So why don't you just ask him [his father-in-law] for the money?
>
> **GRIMSRUD** Or your fucking wife, you know.
>
> **CARL** Or your fucking wife, Jerry.
>
> **JERRY** Well, it's all just part of this - they don't know I need it, see. Okay, so there's that. And even if they did, I wouldn't get it. So there's that on top, then. See, these're personal matters.
>
> **CARL** Personal matters.
>
> **JERRY** Yah. Personal matters that needn't, uh –
>
> **CARL** Okay, Jerry. You're asking us to perform this mission, but you,…. you won't,…. uh, you won't - aw, fuck it, let's take a look at that Ciera.

Carl's incompetent use of language and his malapropisms are evident throughout *Fargo*—he tries to describe second-hand smoking as carcinogenic, but failing to do so, settles for "a cancer agent"— this reflects his education, depicting him as being ill-equipped for the real world. Ethan Coen declared in an interview the intention behind Carl and Jerry's plain ineptitude:

> One of the reasons for making them simple-minded was our desire to go against the Hollywood cliché of the bad guy as a super-professional who controls everything he does. In fact, in most cases criminals belong to the strata of society least equipped to face life, and that's the reason they're caught so often. In this sense too, our movie is closer to life than the conventions of cinema and genre movies. (Allen, 2006: 80)

Evidently, their dialogues support a thematic concern that runs through many of the Coen Brothers' films: fragmentation of the society and the resulting isolation.

The quest for money fragments this society isolating all its citizens, from the most powerful - the wealthy patriarch Wade Gustafson - through middle-class Jerry Lundegaard, to the men that Jerry hires to do his dirty work. Authoritarian Gustafson destroys even the community of his own family through self-seeking. He uses Lundegaard, his son-in-law, as a mere instrument for personal enrichment: invites him to his office to discuss a business deal, does not even provide him with a chair, and steals Lundegaard's idea for a project that he presents him with. Gustafson evaluates his son-in-law by commercial standards. However, his direct family, his daughter and grandson, fare no better. Wade Gustafson would rather risk Jean's life than his money. After Jerry tells him that his daughter has been kidnapped, he worries about security: "But where's my protection? They got Jean here! I give these sons a bitches a million dollars, where's my guarantee they're gonna let her go?" Later Wade wants to bargain with the kidnappers to get a fair deal, he wants to offer them only half a million dollars for Jean. But his accountant and Jerry manage to convince him otherwise. Gustafson still insists on delivering the money himself, going against the kidnappers' instructions, because he does not trust his son-in-law. Finally in the parking lot, Gustafson is only worried about the deal, he repeats "No Jean, no money!" inciting Carl to shoot him.

Jerry Lundegaard, somewhat like his father-in-law, is characterized by a lack of meaningful relationships in his life. In his professional life he cheats his customers and his company as well. His most atrocious act is ordering his wife's kidnapping but it is consistent with his other acts. When Carl Showalter threatens him, Lundegaard tells him to stay away from his son, yet he introduced the crooks into his family's lives himself, not to mention the fact that he also harms Scotty (Tony Denman) by depriving him of his mother. Scotty is the only one in the film who expresses genuine concern for Jean's well-being. Jerry somewhere in his mind knows that what he is doing is wrong, but his knowledge is superficial and so it cannot neutralize his desire for money. The money works as an incentive for Jerry to ignore his doubts, his greed drives him on. Being used to committing white-collar crime (non-violent and for profit) to maintain appearances and prevent the loss of reputation, he never expects the criminals to act otherwise. Jerry tells Scotty "These men only want money; they

have no reason to hurt your mother." Yet uncertainty and stupidity play major roles in Coen films.

The crooks, neurotic Showalter and affectless Grimsrud (as the names seem to convey) have nothing of value to lose, thus they are more unrestrained than Lundegaard and Gustafson in their anarchic pursuit of money. While emotions such as shame or guilt are unknown to both of them, the film distinguishes the two. Grimsrud is depicted throughout as a completely isolated figure. He rarely speaks; he detests the sound of other humans. In fact, he tells Jean as they drive down the highway, "Shut the fuck up or I'll throw you back in the trunk, you know," and later kills her to silence her crying. He functions only to satisfy desires that do not include the desire for ties to others: first and foremost for money, for pancakes, and for "unguent" after Jean bites him. In fact, he does not appear to experience, much less to desire, the emotions that result from human ties. His visit to the prostitutes is Showalter's idea—Grimsrud merely wanted pancakes—and in contrast to the other three characters in the shared motel room, he does not speak a word. True to his character, Grimsrud does not care or ask Showalter what happened, when he returns soaked in blood after collecting the payoff. He even lacks the emotion of cruelty; while Showalter laughs at Jean when she tries to escape bundled up through the snow, Grimsrud remains expressionless. Self-indulgence causes him to kill five people without hesitation: the highway patrolman and the two occupants of a passing car to insure his safety, Jean because he is annoyed with her shrieks, and Showalter who wants the Cutlass Ciera for himself, besides disturbing his viewing of the soap opera. He manifests no signs of any sort of inner conflict, no shame, with regard to his violent behavior (Conard, 2009: 102) His disposal of Carl in the wood-chipper, in which he reduces Carl's body to bloody fragments on the white snow, is the ultimate act of human disintegration in the film, and is appropriately performed by the film's most fragmented character (Carriere, 2003: 573).

In contrast, Showalter is shown attempting to create ties to others; he tries to fight his loneliness. He seeks the companionship of prostitutes, the second woman that he hires he takes to a bar to listen to the blind José Feliciano in concert (*Coenesque*) and he tries to talk with her as if they were on a date, but

this fails due to the nature of their instrumental relationship. In fact, Showalter needs to talk all the time and he criticizes Grimsrud for his silent nature:

> **CARL** ... Would it kill you to say something?
>
> **GRIMSRUD** I did.
>
> **CARL** "No." First thing you've said in the last four hours. That's a, that's a fountain of conversation, man. That's a geyser. I mean, whoa, daddy, stand back, man. Shit, I'm sittin' here driving, man, doin' all the driving, whole fuckin' way from Brainerd, drivin', tryin' to, you know, tryin' to chat, keep our spirits up, fight the boredom of the road, and you can't say one fucking thing just in the way of conversation.
>
> *Grimsurd smokes, gazing out the window.*
>
> **CARL ..**. Well, fuck it, I don't have to talk either, man. See how you like it...

As a matter of fact he is so desperate for human contact while at the isolated cabin that he begs the television to work:

> **CARL** ...days ... be here for days with a - DAMMIT! - a goddamn mute nothin' to do ... and the fucking -**DAMMIT!...**
>
> *Each "dammit" brings a pound of his fist on the TV.*
>
> **CARL** ... TV doesn't even ... plug me in, man... Gimmee a - DAMMIT! - signal... Plug me into the ozone, baby... Plug me into the ozone - FUCK!...

He evokes loneliness, isolated people who live with the television set on, even if they are not watching it, just to have some company, some sense of community, provided by the background noise. Human contact outside of Showalter's world, however, proves to be dangerous because Brainerd's community is not all about self-indulgence, it is a functional community. It is Showalter's attempt at human connection in a rural Minnesota bar which leads the Brainerd police to his and Grimsrud's hideout on Moose Lake.

Showalter is incapable of genuine relationships because he uses others to serve self-interest; as a result there are no bases for creating mutual bonds. Any challenge to his self-interest, even a small insistence for payment by a parking lot attendant (he tries to leave without paying, after stealing a license plate), provokes a violent verbal attack. In Minneapolis, after sex with the escort is interrupted and he is beaten and humiliated by the mechanic Shep Proudfoot (Steve Reevis), Lundegaard's contact with the criminals, Showalter reacts by verbally abusing Jerry Lundegaard, threatening to kill his son, and demanding the entire ransom for himself. He shoots Gustafson for trying to impose

conditions on the ransom. Like Grimsrud, Showalter then murders a potential witness without hesitation. His pursuit of self-interest leads to blindingly stupid behavior (like burying the money in a vast field of snow and marking it with a snow scraper which will soon disappear), and finally causes his death (over the division of the Cutlass Ciera). Showalter ends up physically fragmented (after his unstoppable chin has been half shot off) like the community where he lives.

The crisis in community is amplified by its corruptive use of language. Language functions in the film like an instrument for self-promotion (car sales, property development or the wife's kidnapping) —all "deals". The film is full of bits and pieces of conversations, except where the stone-faced Grimsrud is concerned. Nevertheless language is not used to nourish interpersonal relations in this community because it lacks meaningful content; its purposes are to deceive and to offend. Lundegaard uses language in order to cheat his customers, using the "Trucoat scam" to increase his profit, promising to talk to his "boss" to get a discount and faking the conversation. He also lies to his son and to the finance officer who is tracking down the security on the company's loans. This dishonest use of language, though unpleasant, may be expected when the setting is an auto-showroom. Nor is it particularly surprising that both crooks lie to each other about the ransom. Yet dishonesty for the sake of self-promotion seems to be the standard form of communication. Jerry's word is as worthless to his family (to his son and father-in-law) as it is to his customers or to the hired crooks. Through his deceptive use of language Gustafson obtains the details of Jerry's property development idea from him, and then cuts him out except for a minimal "finder's fee". Jerry uses language in the same way to deceive the kidnappers into working for him for a fraction of the ransom he plans to collect. He rehearses notifying Jean's father about the kidnapping, practicing the correct degree of anxiety. In addition, he must lie repeatedly to his father-in-law while attempting to get him to pay the ransom money.

Instead of bringing the community together, language seems to fragment it even further. The only honest linguistic expressions of emotion toward one another that the citizens of this community use are offensive, such as Gustafson's nasty exclusion of his son-in-law from the family (saying that Jean and Scotty will have nothing to worry about financially), and his later statement that Jerry cannot take the money to the kidnappers because "with all due

respect, Jerry, I don't want you mucking this up." Carl Showalter is linguistically imprudent- a big mouth- he directs abuse at a parking lot attendant, at Jerry Lundegaard, at Gustafson, as well as (unwisely) at Shep Proudfoot, at Mr. Mohra (the Brainerd man who reports Showalter's suspicious comments to the police), and at Grimsrud. Consequently, the division of the members of the community cannot be repaired because the exchange of communication has been violated, leaving the community without a functional method of self-renewal—the shared language.

As was mentioned before, the only comfort seems to be provided by television for it fills the emptiness left by the failure of the members of the community to bond with one another. While ignoring Lundegard's attempt at contact, "Who they playin'?" his father-in-law watches football on television. Showalter and Grimsrud share a motel room with prostitutes and Johnny Carson's "Tonight Show" in what appears to be a domestic scene. Jerry Lundegaard's colleague watches TV at work while Jerry fakes negotiating a better deal for his customers. Jean Lundegaard (who caricatures the typical American housewife) wears pink pajamas and watches a cooking show on television as her kidnappers approach, first confusing them with the fiction on TV (as with Grimsrud, reality comes as a disruption of the cheap dreams of popular culture) and then hilariously trying to fight them off with a pink telephone. Showalter, as noted before, seeks companionship in television at the lakeside cabin. Even the alienated Grimsrud likes to watch television in his spare time from crime. Television functions as a substitute for human relationships in this cold and empty society. With no shared community worth living by, without even a language by which to share meanings, the world outside of Brainerd is left to survive in anarchic violence. Its inhabitants are alienated not only from one another, but also from the principles that allow community to function. While these principles would help restrain the hostilities, the members of the community would also offer guidance and present obstacles to the fulfillment of self-interest only.

Brainerd: an actual community

After more than thirty minutes of grotesque and anarchic violence, the image suddenly shifts to the Gunderson's comfortable home in Brainerd, the small town that is depicted as the site of an actual community. Both communities are joined by means of the highway. As was mentioned before, the Coens convey a sense of infinite distance through the filming of flat desolate snow covered plains. The distance is not physical, however, but mental. Brainerd is characterized by the traits the urban community lacks: "a group of people sharing common interests and attitudes…social values and responsibilities"…"altruism, reciprocity, and beneficence that comes from working together… Communities share a language, rituals and customs". All of these serve to create bonds which function as the driving force to renew the community. Brainerd's community values humanity over self-interest, especially material self-interest; its citizens share meanings, support and care for one another maintaining a social network.

The Gunderson's household is like a safe haven as the camera leaves the cruel and cold world outside. Every scene set in Brainerd features a police officer, depicting the idea of a community of law-abiding citizens. (Carriere, 2003: 576) However, the criminals are caught in a routinely banal form because community functions, thus the information is passed down the chain. Mr. Mohra (Bain Boehlke) does his civic duty and reports Showalter's threatening conversation to a police-officer (Gary) which helps to trace the kidnappers' location:

> **MAN** ... So, I'm tendin' bar there at Ecklund & Swedlin's last Tuesday and this little guy's drinkin' and he says, 'So where can a guy find some action - I'm goin' crazy down there at the lake.' And I says, 'What kinda action?' and he says, 'Woman action, what do I look like,' And I says 'Well, what do I look like, I don't arrange that kinda thing,' and he says, 'I'm goin' crazy out there at the lake' and I says, 'Well, this ain't that kinda place.'
>
> **GARY** Uh-huh.
>
> **MAN** So he says, 'So I get it, so you think I'm some kinda jerk for askin',' only he doesn't use the word jerk.
>
> **GARY** I unnerstand.

MAN And then he calls me a jerk and says the last guy who thought he was a jerk was dead now. So I don't say nothin' and he says, 'What do ya think about that?' So I says, 'Well, that don't sound like too good a deal for him then.'

GARY Ya got that right.

MAN And he says, 'Yah, that guy's dead and I don't mean a old age.' And then he says, 'Geez, I'm goin' crazy out there at the lake.'

GARY White Bear Lake?

MAN Well, Ecklund & Swedlin's, that's closer ta Moose Lake, so I made that assumption.

GARY Oh sure.

MAN So, ya know, he's drinkin', so I don't think a whole great deal of it, but Mrs. Mohra heard about the homicides out here and she thought I should call it in, so I called it in. End a story.

The Coens introduce the community of Brainerd with a feeling of tenderness, by introducing Police Chief Marge Gunderson snuggled up in bed with her husband, Norm (John Carroll Lynch). While in Brainerd, the camera sometimes gazes mockingly at a huge statue of Paul Bunyan (the all American frontiersman and conquering hero) some might argue that it is instead Paul Bunyan that gazes mockingly at the miserable life going on around him. However, Marge is the heroine of this film, even if she is only introduced thirty minutes through the film. During the night she is awakened by a call that summons her to investigate a crime committed near Brainerd. She is then seen going through the familiar rituals of eating breakfast and getting the car started. The Coens symbolically represent community embodied in the seven month pregnant Marge, as cared for by the community of Brainerd and as caring in return. Her husband, who has no need to rise yet, does so to fix her some eggs, because as he says repeatedly, “ya gotta eat a breakfast.” When she arrives at the scene of the crime, her colleague offers her coffee saying, “Thought you might need a little warm-up.” Later, after reacting with nausea to the sight of the bodies, and then comically stating that she is “hungry again”, once more her partner is concerned and asks, “You had breakfast yet, Margie?” Norm (also a significant name), who stays at home and does the housework, usually brings her lunch to the police station. She interrupts her work temporarily to supply her husband with bait for his fishing trip. She also reassures her husband, a wildlife

painter, that he is better than his competitors in a contest for wild duck paintings. She encourages him again when his mallard is only selected for the three cent stamp. She comforts her old school friend Mike Yanagita (Steve Park) politely when he starts to cry, telling Marge that his wife Linda has died of leukemia. She is still concerned with him when she learns from another friend that Mike suffers psychiatric problems and lied to her about Linda. Marge is indeed a socially sensitive person.

Marge shows a common civility towards everyone (strangers, colleagues or family). Looking at the dead cop's body, she offers, "He looks like a nice enough guy. It's a real shame." (Her placidity resonates with the Swedish stereotypes.) She proceeds to correct her colleague's wrong guess that the dead trooper was writing down the criminal's license plate number when he recorded "DLR" (Dealer) in his citation book, she does so gently "I'm not sure I agree with you a hunnert percent n your police work there, Lou" and then to make sure he is not offended proceeds to tell him a joke. While interviewing the two prostitutes who spent the night with the kidnappers, Marge seems genuinely interested in the conversation with them and even asks about their hometowns and their schooling.

Traditional communities are more socially cohesive because they have been around longer; seemingly better if in rural isolation. In them, people develop trust by forming simple straightforward social relations. In contrast to the community in crisis from Minneapolis, Marge's community in Brainerd has bonded to form a social network of mutual support. Norm, as mentioned, rises with Marge, feeds her, and starts her car for her. While Marge does not let the investigation of a triple homicide sidetrack her from having lunch with her husband and providing him with bait for his fishing trip. When this community uses language, it sustains and encourages. Marge and Norm's first scene ends with an exchange of "Love yas", and the film ends with their expressions of mutual love and of eager anticipation of expanding their family: "I love you, Margie." "I love you, Norm." "Two more months." Each wants the best for the other. But mutual support in Brainerd is not confined to the family. Other members of the community reveal interest and consideration for each other in their conversations. Marge's colleagues greet Norm and ask about his work ("Hiya, Norm, how's the painting goin'?" Lou asks) and his recreation (Gary

asks, “ey, Norm, I thought you were goin’ ice fishin’ up at Mille Lacs?”). Mr. Mohra and Gary engage in a friendly chat after Mohra reports his exchange with Showalter at Ecklund & Swedlin's. The offensive words that the inhabitants of the world outside Brainerd use when their plans are frustrated are never voiced by the inhabitants of Brainerd, not even under the stress of dealing with several homicides, or for the sake of accuracy in quoting. Mr. Mohra modifies Showalter’s fowl language, then indicates his editing: “only he doesn’t use the word ‘jerk’.” When television appears in Marge and Norm’s home, it is not as a provider of artificial relationships, but as an information source, a ubiquitous part of life. Artifices are not required as substitutes for relationships because in the Brainerd community, the real thing—human interaction—is not a painful, destructive experience to be avoided, but instead a desired comfort.

In the afore mentioned environment of respectful support, money, the other community’s ultimate goal, is insignificant. The state trooper in Brainerd is killed because he refuses Showalter’s bribe to ignore his traffic violation. Marge discounts Norm’s concern about the monetary value of the stamp his painting was selected to appear on:

NORM Three-cent stamp.

MARGE Your mallard? Norm, that's terrific!

Norm tries to suppress ***a smile of pleasure.*** [emphasis mine]

NORM It's just the three cent.

MARGE It's terrific!

NORM Hautman's blue-winged teal got the twenty-nine cent. People don't much use the three-cent.

MARGE Oh, for Pete's - a course they do! Every time they raise the darned postage, people need the little stamps!

The words “homely”, “home-spun” and “down-at-home” come to mind, but Marge is extremely homely, unworldly and gullible. Norm shares Marge’s values; as he delivers the news he betrays himself by the expression on his face. Norm’s wildlife paintings, his fishing trip, the wildlife documentary that he and Marge watch, and her pregnancy suggest a family in synchrony with nature. The wider community also appears at ease in a natural environment (even at negative temperatures). Money does not function here as an instrument of power, but as something like food (food is actually the currency of Brainerd) or

conversation, which is necessary but natural. Marge shares the community's belief with Grimsrud, in her final speech, as she transports him to jail:

> **MARGE** So that was Mrs. Lundegaard on the floor in there? (*long pause*) And I guess that was your accomplice in the wood chipper.
>
> *Grimsrud's head bobs with bumps on the road; otherwise he is motionless, reactionless, scowling and gazing out…*
>
> **MARGE** And those three people in Brainerd?...
>
> *No response. Marge, gazing forward, seems to be talking to herself*... And for what? For a little bit of money. There's more to life than a little money, ya know. Don't ya know that? ... And here ya are, and it's a beautiful day. Well, I just don't unnerstand it.

The incomprehension is mutual. Grimsrud remains sullen and does not respond. In his life, her words do not make any sense. While Marge avoids showing her feelings; he does not have any feelings to show.

While Brainerd is threatened by external forces, nothing appears to disturb the unity of the community. Their uniformity is echoed by external sameness; all the inhabitants of Brainerd who appear in the film are Euro-Americans. Everyone speaks the same humorous singsong dialect (a dialogue coach was hired to train the actors) in a subdued way, identified as "Minnesota Nice" (ironical name given to American-English spoken by Scandinavian immigrants). It is as if the members of the community seek reassurance through the common dialect that the public conventions still abide. Even though the Lundegaards and Gustafsons are also of Scandinavian descent they are not part of Brainerd's community, they are living in the city and as such have acquired other characteristics like pursuing self-interest at any cost. At times the clichés become comically silly: "okey dokey", "there in a jif". To further corroborate this, all the characters have names of Swedish origin, unless they are outsiders. The Coen brothers' choice of rural Minnesota as a setting for their story lends credibility to the characters' homogeneity (most of the population remains Euro-American) and emphasizes it by placing them in an equally homogeneous landscape. The scene of Marge's investigation of the murders reinforces the suggestion of criminality as an external intrusion into an otherwise peaceful community in rural isolation. It takes place against a background of white which is interrupted only by the wrecked car and two bloody bodies in the snow. Once

Brainerd has survived its trial and apparent order has been restored by the capture of Grimsrud, the opening image is repeated - sky, earth, and road impossible to differentiate in the snow. Consequently, there is always uncertainty; Brainerd is not perfect or safe as the music seems to convey.

The other community is tempting

Marge's exchanges with Mike in the city imply that even though she respects her community and adopts its values, she feels attracted to difference. The film suggests that Marge calls Mike to arrange the meeting in Minneapolis, instead of using the police there to help her, she uses the investigation as an excuse: "Yah, okay, I think I'll drive down there, then". The scene at the Radisson, when she goes out for dinner with Mike, is the only one in which she appears prettily dressed in a feminine way: she wears a ruffled blouse with flowers and make-up. For Marge, Mike is attractively different. However, the Coens make it clear that for Marge this is nothing more than a flirtation to reassure a heavily pregnant married woman that she is still interesting and attractive to other men. When she arrives Mike moves to sit on her side of the dinner table but Marge briskly instructs him to return to the other side of the table: "No, I—Mike—whyncha sit over there, I'd prefer that," she says, but being courteous, reserved, and mild mannered, she cannot bear to risk offending him: "No, just so I can see ya, ya know. Don't have to turn my neck," she adds. The dinner date with Mike is an opportunity to pamper a part of herself which cannot be indulged in Brainerd. Norm appears to know this, and the temptations that can result; when Marge declares that she will go to the Twin Cities to investigate, Norm glances at her curiously, as if he is concerned and pauses before commenting, "oh yah?"

Small town Brainerd seems to lack many stimulating challenges for Marge; she is an intelligent woman who instantly and accurately reconstructs the crimes. Her interrogations lead her to the Ciera; to check the telephone calls to the Twin Cities from the motel; to Proudfoot and to the auto showroom; to Lundegaard and to take actions leading to his flight and consequent arrest. But Marge's pleasure in her individual accomplishments emerges, despite her unshakeable composure, when she locates the killers:

Marge (in the police cruiser, speaking into the radio): There's the car! There's the car!

Voice (from the radio): Whose car?

Marge: *My* car! *My* car! Tan Ciera!

Ignoring instructions not to go in without "backup," she promptly confronts and captures the huge Grimsrud alone. Her final speech to Grimsrud indicates that she would not care to live in the other community (although at times she feels drawn to it). This is not to say, though, that the Coens point to the normalcy of Brainerd, even banality, as desirable, but rather that they ask how one is to survive in a world where, beyond these "risibly dull" communities, ultimate conflict, resulting from the pursuit of individuality, exists. What Marge does is choose the lesser of two evils. Marge seems intelligent enough to create a solution for herself. Thomas Leitch gives the best insight to *Fargo*:

> Marge represents Fargo's moral center, but the film refuses to put her and the unexceptionable moral values she stands for at its formal center. Instead it merely suggests that the normal world Marge represents poses as direct an affront to the criminal outrages perpetrated by the kidnappers as their outrages do to the ideas of normalcy represented by Jerry's smile, Paul Bunyan's statue, and the film's endless wastes of snow. Nor does the film show either side to be able to comprehend the other, either in individual collisions or at the fadeout; it merely shows that each exists in the other, like yin and yang, so that the criminal world is as comically normal as the normal world is comically outrageous. (2002: 285-287)

Chapter Three: *The Big Lebowski* (1998)

"After seeing Los Angeles and thisahere story I'm about to unfold – wal, I guess I seen somethin' ever' bit as stupefyin'" (Cowboy voice-over, *The Big Lebowski)*

In *The Big Lebowski*, the Coen brothers create an ironic and ludicrous patchwork of a fragmented society, featuring a backward glance at the popular culture of the late sixties and seventies when they were growing up. The film describes the struggles of the Dude (Jeff Bridges), whose life is concerned with three things: bowling, drinking White Russians and smoking marijuana. Things go wrong from the start when by accident the Dude becomes involved in kidnapping, the world of pornography, swindlers and violent German nihilists. Like their counterparts in other Coen films, the characters are derailed by uncertainty and unknowing. The story has been described as a pastiche of Raymond Chandler's *The Big Sleep* (1946). And indeed the Coens pay homage to Chandler's literary narrative techniques. The old Lebowski in the wheelchair is taken from *The Big Sleep's* General Sternwood (knee blanket included), the Dude himself is a hippy version of detective Philip Marlowe, and the action is set in Los Angeles. In making the old Lebowski the film's primary antagonist, they recall and enlarge Chandler's critique of the wealthy. The Coens also adopt some surrealist ideas in the stylistic techniques/visual ideas: the dream sequences, the flying carpet, the dancing landlord and the beach party. Regarding this aspect, Joel Coen states in an interview given in 1998 to Michel Ciment and Hubert Niogret:

> The dreamlike sequences echo in one sense the hallucinations of the private eye in Raymond Chandler's novels. It's also to do with the marijuana consumption of the hero! For me that corresponds to Los Angeles, which is a more surreal place than New York. There's an Oriental side, a *1001 Arabian Nights* aspect to that city. You can't be more remote from a New York sensibility than in that beach party given by the pornographer. It's the world of the drugs consumer. And the sound of bowling is also a narcotic for the Dude. In people's minds the hallucinatory

> psychedelic culture is associated with Southern California and San Francisco. (Allen, 2006: 104)

The Coens keep piling on the vignettes, through surprise, and unexpected juxtapositions (sometimes surrealist ones) of popular culture themes; they create a cultural patchwork, but a very comical one. The Coens like "to create a certain distance to take viewers away from reality by enclosing the story in a frame" in this case, this is achieved by the voice-over of the Stranger, played by Sam Elliot (Allen, 2006: 102) and the frame could be that of a Western. Nevertheless, this voice-over narration, framing *The Big Lebowski,* is also commonplace in *film noir*. He is the figure of the lonesome cowboy, well known in popular culture and cinema but also from advertisements - the Marlboro man. According to Körte and Seesslen, this narrator is a man of straw, the fiction within the fiction, he could have come straight from the film *Tombstone (1993)* where he (Sam Elliot) plays Virgil Earp, "another red herring in a whole series of them" (1999:194) the money being another. Thus, the film starts out like a Western,

> **VOICE-OVER** A way out west there was a fella, I want to tell you about, fella by the name of Jeff Lebowski. At least, that was the handle his lovin' parents gave him, but he never had much use for it himself. This Lebowski, he called himself the Dude. Now, Dude, that's a name no one would self-apply where I come from. But then, there was a lot about the Dude that didn't make a whole lot of sense to me. And a lot about where he lived, like-wise. But then again, maybe that's why I found the place s'durned innarestin'…
>
> Now this story I'm about to unfold took place back in the early nineties--just about the time of our conflict with Sad'm and the Eye-rackies. I only mention it 'cause some- times there's a man--I won't say a hee-ro, 'cause what's a hee-ro?--but sometimes there's a man…And I'm talkin' about the Dude here --sometimes there's a man who, wal, he's the man for his time'n place, he fits right in there--and that's the Dude, in Los Angeles.

The protagonist's name suggests a mocking of the "Duke" played by John Wayne in the first adaptation of *True Grit* for cinema in 1968. The opening sequence is serenaded by the Sons of the Pioneers singing "Drifting along with the Tumbling Tumbleweeds," a traditional cowboy song. Meanwhile the camera follows a ball of tumbleweed rolling across the desert into Los Angeles's

deserted streets and finally to the ocean, suggesting that the myth of the frontiersman has also rolled out to sea. Even so, the characters seem to keep looking back to the myths and archetypes of the Wild West, propagated by the dying television writer Arthur Digby Sellers (who did not write *Branded*) and embodied in the Stranger. The Western being the only major genre that is uniquely American, it usually reflects American tensions and its ideals are often part of the protagonist's values. He sacrifices his individual freedom for the good of the community and in the process (re)establishes some form of justice (inevitably evoking the remake of *True Gritt* (2010) with also Jeff Bridges as protagonist, produced and directed by the Coens as well). *The Big Lebowski* is about two very different communities in crisis: a virtual and wild, but more honest community, struggles with a conservative, apparently civilized, but more deceptive community. The Dude, obviously a part of the virtual community, is forced to sacrifice his well-being, in the form of his rug, to end deception and thus establish justice. Everything which happens to the Dude is not his doing, he does not act (he has a hyper-laid back nature!), he reacts. He is the tumbleweed propelled inadvertently along the convoluted plot of an apparently criminal intrigue.

The film shifts from genre to genre (Western, comedy and *noir*-detective). Todd A. Comer sees the film as an "interrupted narrative," pointing out "the intrusion of the pornographic and detective genres in what is framed as a Western film, and, moreover, shot through with western stylistic motifs" (2005:99). In addition, the opening scenes also introduce easily identifiable neo-*noir* (a consciously comic use of *noir* plots) themes, which can also be interpreted as a form of pastiche. There is the theme of the loner, perhaps not the hero of the old westerns but a rootless transient nevertheless, symbolized in the tumbleweed blown along by chance. There is the motif of the artificially constructed political culture, provided by the television coverage of the Gulf War, but also by Nixon's bowling poster in the Dude's living-room (this is deeply ironic as he was a conservative president who disliked hippie counterculture and anti-war demonstrators). The film also brings out themes from the Sixties, establishment *versus* the antiestablishment, in the two contrasting Lebowskis. Another *noir* or Hitchcockian subject is explored, that of "mistaken identity"—an ordinary and innocent man is mistakenly identified as being guilty of some sort

of crime. This last topic provides many moments of bizarre entertainment, mainly due to incongruities and the Dude's presence in places where he evidently does not belong.

Who is this person, the Dude?

Similar to a Western, this film starts with a long shot of the wilderness and then proceeds to introduce its protagonist. The moment the Dude is introduced at the supermarket, one realizes it is satire (after all, what would a cowboy be doing in the nineties in a Los Angeles' supermarket). In keeping with the film's visual motif of bizarre and piquant details, the male protagonist Jeffrey Lebowski a.k.a. "The Dude" seems rather out of place with long hair and a beard, wearing a bathrobe, and a dirty, torn T-shirt (invoking *Raising Arizona* where the female shoppers have curlers in their hair and emit annoying shrieks). This outfit could as easily represent Jesus (Christ, not the film's bowling pederast) as a form of hipster/cowboy. Beside the dress code, he ignores other conventions as well, he opens the cartons of milk which he proceeds to sniff and then taste for freshness. When he pays, by writing out a check for sixty-nine cents, his moustache is stained with milk. However, he does not mean to insult others with his disregard for social codes; he just has an extremely passive nature, which many are happy to call laziness. Throughout the film there are many examples of boundaries being broken by the Dude and his friends, portraying their wildness (the most evident being its use of sexual language: the word "fuck" and its variants are used about 280 times) and there appear many examples of people who live on the periphery of society – the Dude himself chooses to live this way. He is always happy to return to his place on the fringes of society after "the dust has settled".

After shopping, the Dude returns to his decrepit bungalow to find two thugs waiting to attack him. They have him confused with a millionaire, also called Jeffrey Lebowski (David Hudleston), and have come to collect the money his wife owes Jackie Treehorn (producer of pornographic films and loan shark). They proceed to stuff his head down the toilet, the Dude objects by saying that he is not married - he offers the raised toilet seat as evidence - and that no one calls him Lebowski. The thugs finally realize that he is telling the truth when they

look around the shabby house, which could not belong to a millionaire. Before leaving, one of them proceeds to urinate on a threadbare rug in the living room - an act which annoys the Dude because the “rug really tied the room together”. Like in a Western, an act of injustice has been committed, the rug, more precious than gold as it stands for the Dude’s well-being, has been urinated on. As another Coen character who suffers from tunnel vision, he spends the rest of the film trying to recover a rug, any rug.

These are people who have learned about life from films and television, which have provided them with fake identities and false values. A clear example of this is given at the beginning of the film, the narrator sets the time of the film by stating that, “it was just about the time of our conflict with Sad'm and the Eye-rackies”. To confirm this time setting, while the Dude pays, the cashier is watching the news with President G. Bush Sr.’s speech, “This aggression will not stand. . . This will not stand!” (referring to Kuwait). When the Dude meets the older Jeffrey Lebowski, the Dude characterizes his motives for coming to visit him by repeating the Bush line from the beginning of the movie, “This will not stand, you know. This aggression will not stand, man.” Meaning that if the crooks urinated on his rug, which “really tied the room together”, because they had him confused with the apparently wealthy Lebowski, the Dude has to be compensated.

The Dude was an anti-war demonstrator in college, an author of the Port Huron Statement and a member of the Seattle Seven (who were arrested and served sentences for their part in anti-Vietnam War protests from 1970-71). This hallmark of sixties leftist politics which rejects the previous generation’s materialism (embodied here by the old Lebowski character) echoes throughout the film. The cultural upheaval of the 1960s that the Dude participated in has become a distant memory after the disillusionment of the 1970s and the conservative Reagan era of the 1980s. But it is not enough that the Dude’s ideals have been crushed. He remains personally under attack by the forces of conservatism (old Lebowski), greed (Treehorn), nihilism (the Germans), and feminism (Maude). Each of these parties forces their way into the Dude’s bungalow at some point and turns him into a punch bag. As a true *Coenesque* character, he is relatively feeble and defenseless against them. The statement which provides further insight into the Dude’s character is proffered

as he tells Maude Lebowski (Julianne Moore), old Lebowski's daughter, about himself when he says he was one of the authors of the Port Huron Statement. And he adds: "The original Port Huron Statement. Not the compromised second draft." This says a lot about his nature: he has chosen to drop out, smoke marijuana, drink White Russians and spend his nights bowling, mostly because he once put a lot of effort into making the world a better place but failed. By now, he has given up trying to improve anything, which could make him a sad character, but he seems to drift along quite contentedly. He has become a "beach bum". America seems to have a fascination with this image of the long-haired-slacker surfer (perhaps a contemporary version of the cowboy). "Beach bums" are regarded as belonging to the anti-materialistic counterculture though in the Dude's case there appear to be connotations of apathy and aimlessness as well; he "abides" by avoiding anything too demanding. In the screenplay, Ethan and Joel Coen describe the Dude as "a man in whom casualness runs deep." That is a very accurate description. Fred Ashe argues that the Dude's archetype is Rip Van Winkle, an American character created by Washington Irving:

> In their comic ineptitude, both serve a critical function, exposing the sickness of a straight society premised on a puritan work ethic – on the equation of self-realization with material accumulation and public accolade. More to the point, though, they address an underlying American concern as well, working to relieve our nagging fear that we are inextricably bound up in the system. To identify with the slacker hero is to deny, if only) imaginatively, our complicity in the dehumanizing world of consumption and competition. (Comentale & Jaffe, 2009:43)

The comparison with Rip Van Winkle has a certain validity, but as the Dude himself becomes more and more trapped in the system's layers of corruption, I do not think he relieves anyone's fears. The Dude is a leftover from the failed revolution of the Sixties. A once passionate man reduced to a somewhat idiotic figure by conservative America, which is best illustrated by the image of the naked Dude in the bathtub. This dark comedy does not celebrate the Dude, but instead satirizes him, albeit affectionately (he nails a plank to his floor so as to wedge a chair against the door, but the door opens the other way and he later trips over the plank; when his car is stolen he stupidly tells the officers about the

briefcase and says it contains his business papers, but seconds later tells them he is unemployed). A “deadbeat and a loser to the square community”, he nevertheless maintains a certain dignity, consistently avoiding conflict and self-advancement to cultivate his bowling and his friendships. Actually, the only thing the Dude seems to have left is his poise, his style, even if by now he does not surf anymore - he still hangs on to the style, as he hangs on to so many other things from his past. In fact, *The Big Lebowski* is populated with chronologically displaced figures: the Dude, born Jeffrey Lebowski, is a creation of the 1960s student rebellions, the paraplegic old Lebowski, is a result of the 1950s Korean war and a “self-made man”, while the violent Walter is shaped by the military predicament of the Vietnam War. All three of these characters define themselves through America’s engagement in global geopolitics in the Cold War. (Keyes, 2006: 8-9)

As a weirdly casual observer, the Dude is a total reversal of the hero-archetype. Heroes are interventionists, people who respond to injustice by using their traits of strength, courage and intellect to set the world straight, that is definitely not how the Dude does things. Yet, all the men in this film embody symbolic opposites of the archetypical male: Walter (John Goodman) is excessively overweight and Donny (Steve Buscemi) is excessively weedy. The patriarch Lebowski is a corpulent disabled man; his Personal Assistant - Brandt (Philip Seymour Hoffman) rather effeminate. However, they find ways of compensating for this difference in other areas of their lives: Walter’s coping strategy is to respond to challenges with excessive violence and military aggression, while the old Lebowski, seems to compensate his physical limitations by being active: “I didn’t blame anyone for the loss of my legs, some Chinaman in Korea *took* them from me, but I went out and achieved anyway.” Donny compensates by being the strongest bowler of the three, and the Dude, by not caring, he “abides” by his slacker non-committal philosophy. Ironically the Dude, despite beatings by various crooks, between drinking White Russians and unintentionally getting Maude Lebowski pregnant, offers a better version of masculine heroics than either Walter or the old Lebowski, the crooks or the political activists.

Regarding the mixed identity theme, both Lebowskis seem like two estranged polarities of male identity, one apparently socially powerful and the

other apparently socially powerless, one is the villain and the other is the good guy. They are *Doppelgängers*, this is made evident when the Dude sees his face reflected on the cover of *Time* magazine at the old Lebowski's house. As there are two Lebowskis in the story, the film's title refers to both of them-one is "big" in size and money, the other has a "big" heart. Regarding this point, it is also significant that the Dude's car was stolen when it was parked in a *"handicapped zone".*

Even if the Dude is "the man for his time'n place", which makes him out to be The Man, The Original; as mentioned, he is still an unlikely representative of manhood and virtue. Although that does not seem to affect him much, his only concern is, as he himself so well puts it*: "…*all the Dude ever wanted was his rug back…not greedy…*"* so that he can go back to the game of bowling and relaxation with his virtual community. The three friends function like a surrogate family: the Dude being the mother figure, with Walter as an overbearing father and Donny as the child.

Concepts of belonging

The Dude's social life is spent bowling with his friends Walter, a Vietnam veteran converted to Judaism, and Donny, a dim and unassuming side-kick and fellow bowler. Together they form a virtual community of men; even if it stands on questionable values it still provides them with a sense of community when crisis surrounds them. Every time something goes wrong, Walter's response is: "Let's go bowling!" The bowling alley functions as a refuge (somewhat like Brainerd in *Fargo*), a place where they can feel that they belong, are accepted and feel a sense of community. Like the saloon in a Western, the bowling alley is highly important for the three friends. This is helped by Roger Deakins' camera work which introduces a note of warmth into the neon lights and the shining/guiding stars of the bowling alley. As Körte and Seesslen argue,

> the bucket seats of the bowling alley are to the three friends what the Doric temple was to the ancient philosophers. This is the navel of the world, a place where you can catch up on the latest news, a place where a quote from Lenin is no more unusual than a chat about the next tournament. (1999: 199-200)

The three friends try hard to interact, even if they fail to listen properly to each other. They portray a yearning for connection to others, they talk about bowling, share stories and tell jokes. This is important and meaningful for them, and hence they promote, even if only virtually, feelings of belonging:

> The philosophical importance of jokes has to do with the way they free us from things that oppress us, by giving us a certain distance, a certain detached perspective on those things, and by the way they foster intimacy and community between the teller and the hearer of the joke." (Conard, 2009:15)

After the ransom drop fails, the Dude repeatedly proclaims, with intensifying despair: "Her life was in our hands, man", which Brandt tells him when he hands over the ransom briefcase. Although characters might fail to understand each other, they do exhibit some communion, for instance in the way they cling to the phrases of the people with whom they come into contact. For instance, by the end of the film the phrase "Where's the money, Lebowski?" is uttered by four different people each in a different context. Late in the film, the Dude repeats the very same question he was asked in the film's beginning. Like any other city, Los Angeles may be inhabited by a wide variety of character types (from the wealthy to the deadbeats, from the perverse to the perverted) but there is a chain of language which suggests it is a community even if not quite a harmonious one (Coughlin, 2005: 16).

However, looking closer, the film also uses humor to explore diverse patterns of displacement and several layers of (mis)communication. Similar to their counterparts in *Fargo,* here too, the characters demonstrate an inability to employ language as a means of clear expression, often fumbling over words and sentences, interrupting each other or speaking in half sentences. The confusion that surrounds the mystery in the narrative seems to be embodied in the Dude's inability to express anything remotely like a reasonable explanation for his circumstances. He is bewildered at the plot unfolding around him which is represented by a brilliantly inarticulate verbal account he gives the old Lebowski as he sits in the back of the millionaire's limousine:

> I--the royal we, you know, the editorial--I dropped off the money, exactly as per--Look, I've got certain information, certain things have come to light, and uh, has it ever occurred to you, man, that given the nature of all this

> new shit, that, uh, instead of running around blaming me, that this whole thing might just be, not, you know, not just such a simple, but uh--you know?

The Dude's account of the situation takes the concept of chaos and disorder to the extreme and his "explanation" of the problem merely serves to further complicate the situation. The Coens are not interested in the writerly eloquence of classical Hollywood dialogue; the Dude's inarticulacy subverts this convention.

Sometimes there are several conversations occurring at once, especially between the Dude, Walter and Donny. Most of the time Donny barely knows what the topic of conversation is. When Walter quotes Lenin in the bowling alley, Donny thinks he is talking about John Lennon. Donny: "I am the walrus", Walter: "Shut the fuck up Donny! V. I. Lenin. Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov!" Donny: "What the fuck is he talking about?" Not a single character fully understands what is going on around them. Another example of displacement and communication breakdown is the absolute confusion experienced by the characters when they try to understand one another's behavior. This is best illustrated in a scene where Maude and Knox Harrington (David Thewlis) chat with their friend over the phone in Italian, giggling away, while the Dude stands with a White Russian in one hand and the *Autobahn* album in the other, absolutely bewildered. They are so stuck in their own realities that everybody else's world view seems alien, therefore productive interaction is near impossible. The members of this community do matter to one another and to the group, but the 'social fabric' hardly works optimally; as a virtual community it might merely be providing "occasions for individuals to focus on themselves in the presence of others".

Bowling apparently ties the community together

The Coens choose bowling because it is a communal sport and one you can do while interacting, drinking and smoking (Joel Coen in Allen, 2006: 88). It is also a very American sport which "does not require its participants to be hip—it epitomizes the provincial at play". (Körte & Seesslen, 1999: 198) In bowling there is a clear segregation of the sexes, women do play, but normally they

have all female teams. Accordingly, in *The Big Lebowski* the time is spent exclusively in the company of other men - male bonding. Consistently, Westerns and *noir*-detective films, the genres pastiched here, are also typically masculine. Resembling a saloon, this is a virtual community of amoral values: where gaming (not poker but bowling), drinking, violence, sex and interactions of a dubious kind take place. As the Dude is a distortion of the historical heroic male identity, while the cowboy heroes drink whiskey, he constantly asks for a White Russian. This is a drink named after the Tsar's losing army in Russia's October Revolution, therefore the Dude's drink represents social failures (Comentale & Jaffe, 2009: 344), a subtle reference to the Dude's passive acceptance of defeat.

Over drinks at the bowling alley the Dude tells his buddies about the attackers, Walter insists that the issue is not the rug but the other Lebowski, a known philanthropist; he then manages to convince the Dude to visit him to seek justice in the form of financial compensation for the stained rug, because the disabled Lebowski has money and the crooks do not. Walter's suggestion invokes an amoral universe, where money and economic interest drive the pursuit of justice. But the patriarch Lebowski (another corpulent and loud old man whose impotence is obvious) tells the Dude to go out and achieve like he did: "Your revolution is over. The bums lost." And "Get a job, sir!" However, since the Dude cares nothing about power he prevails peacefully. He walks out telling the assistant that the old man allows him to take any rug in the house and he even has a servant carry the rug to his car. As the Dude is leaving he meets Lebowski's very blond, trophy wife, "to use the parlance of our times". Bunny (Tara Reid) is a star in pornographic films, who, coincidently, comes from Minnesota. Soon after this encounter the Dude is summoned back to the house where a cunningly tearful Lebowski shows him a ransom note from his wife's kidnappers. While smoking a joint, the Dude's comment is "Bummer, man." Lebowski's assistant then proceeds to tell the Dude he has been chosen to act as courier (or as a dupe to help see off Lebowski's wife) and he will be paid twenty thousand dollars for his services. The Dude cannot believe his luck and asks him: "So he thinks it's the carpet-pissers, huh?"

As soon as the Dude shares the information with his pals, Walter offers to come along and deliver the million dollar ransom. Walter even manages to

come up with a “simple plan” to outsmart the kidnappers, substituting the money with dirty underwear. Of course, this initiative leads to disaster; somehow Walter’s instincts are always wrong. Walter’s answer to the crisis he alone has provoked is, selfish as usual, “Let’s go bowling!” Walter Sobchak, the Dude’s bowling partner, mirrors American archetypes as well: his constant memories of Vietnam (he persistently places his civilian conflicts in terms of the Vietnam War), his violence, his religious pliability, his relationship to women, his know-it-all claims and his macho showing-off.

DUDE Just, just take it easy, Walter.

WALTER That's your answer to everything, Dude. And let me point out--pacifism is not--look at our current situation with that camelfucker in Iraq--pacifism is not something to hide behind.

Chance and caprice seem to rule here too. The Coens portray Californians who get into situations that spiral out of control. Nobody seems to follow any order in this film (except Walter in a twisted way) and the characters seem to be chasing pipe-dreams. Of course, it might be hard to follow rules in a place where there do not seem to be any rules to follow: California as a social frontier where all behavior is hedonistic and individualistic, where no guidance is offered by family or community. Serving to illustrate this well are most scenes involving Walter, but there is also an episode, as part of a joke on racial coexistence and music in the film, when an African-American Rastafarian taxi driver throws the Dude out from his cab only because the Dude does not “like his music,” the Eagles.

A scene which highlights the Dude’s pacifism and vulnerability, is presented with the naked Dude relaxing in the bathtub after a puzzling day when three German nihilists break into his bungalow. As he complains that it is a “private residence”, they drop a marmot into the tub between his legs saying, “Vee vant zat money. Vee belief in nossing. If vee don’t get the money vee come back tomorrow and cut off your chonson.” The Dude shares this episode with his mates at the bowling alley to which Walter replies:

WALTER Fucking Germans. Nothing changes. Fucking Nazis.

DONNY They were Nazis, Dude?

WALTER Come on, Donny, they were threatening castration!

WALTER And let's also not forget--let's not forget, Dude--that keeping wildlife, an amphibious rodent, for uh, domestic, you know, within the city--

that isn't legal either.

DUDE What're you, a fucking park ranger now?

WALTER No, I'm--

DUDE Who gives a shit about the fucking marmot!

WALTER --We're sympathizing here, Dude--

DUDE Fuck your sympathy! I don't need your sympathy, man, I need my fucking Johnson!

"This is not 'Nam. This is bowling. There are rules."

While the Dude chooses to "abide" in the face of aggression, the wild and apoplectic Walter echoes Bush's threat "I'm talking about drawing a line in the sand, Dude. Across this line you do not, uh—and also, Dude, Chinaman is not the preferred, uh…. Asian-American. Please." Walter, who wears *Desert Storm* khaki, a Rambo-like bandanna and looks ready to fight anytime throughout the film, offers fine moral logic to camouflage his aggressiveness. Walter seeks justice through violence while pretending a politically correct use of language to disguise his intent. Walter embodies the exaggerated neo-colonial project gone wrong. (Keyes, 2006: 8) Instead of a critique of a specific foreign policy, however, the film presents a general questioning of America's capability to intercede and "gallop to the rescue" of others.

Walter is the only character who tries hard to define himself in relation to a wider community, albeit delusionally: he is Jewish, American, a Vietnam veteran and part of a bowling team. Walter is obsessed with rules, it is irrelevant what the rules of the different groups are about, whether they conflict or not; all that matters is that he must follow the rules. He points a gun at another bowler, to defend the rules of bowling, while breaking a much more important rule of civil society. Walter is anti-socially violent; he is a modern cowboy taking the law into his own hands. Even though the Dude tries to calm him down, time and time again, Walter refuses to yield:

WALTER This is not Nam. This is bowling. There are rules.

DUDE Come on Walter, it's just--it's Smokey. So his toe slipped over a little, it's just a game.

WALTER This is a league game. This determines who enters the next round robin, am I wrong?

SMOKEY Yeah, but--

WALTER Am I wrong!? Am I wrong!?

DUDE You're not wrong, Walter. You're just an asshole.

The Dude is also often annoyed at Walter's strange Jewish devotion, he accuses him of living in the past, yet Walter wants to have an identity, to define himself as part of a wider community, to belong to a larger tradition. Walter shares the Dude's sense of displacement, but he, unlike the Dude, is tortured by his rootlessness. However his embrace of Judaism is hilariously arbitrary and grotesque, it is a result of his marriage to a Jewish woman from whom he has been divorced for five years, which only highlights the absurdity of attempting to introduce a fixed ethos into a fragmented contemporary culture. His Judaism is an incoherent mixture of various elements (such as respecting the Jewish Sabbath- Saturday), dislocated from contexts in which they originally may have made sense:

WALTER I'm saying, I see what you're getting at, Dude, he kept the money, but my point is, here we are, it's shabbas, the sabbath, which I'm allowed to break only if it's a matter of life and death--

DUDE Walter, come off it. You're not even fucking Jewish, you're--

WALTER What the fuck are you talking about?

DUDE You're fucking Polish Catholic—

WALTER What the fuck are you talking about? I converted when I married Cynthia! Come on, Dude!

DUDE Yeah, and you were--

WALTER You know this!

DUDE And you were divorced five fucking years ago.

WALTER Yeah? What do you think happens when you get divorced? You turn in your library card? Get a new driver's license? Stop being Jewish? I'm as Jewish as fucking Tevye!

DUDE It's just part of your whole sick Cynthia thing. Taking care of her fucking dog. Going to her fucking synagogue. You're living in the fucking past.

WALTER Three thousand years of beautiful tradition, from Moses to Sandy Koufax--YOU'RE GODDAMN RIGHT I LIVE IN THE PAST!...

Walter ranks bowling on about the same level as his religious devotion. Troubled about the Dude's concern with the case of the missing wife, Walter

exclaims, “We can’t drag this negative energy into the tournament.” Thus Walter creates an illusion of community for himself. His claim “I’m as Jewish as Tevye” is truly ironic because it refers to the peasant Tevye of *Fiddler on the Roof (1964)*, who attempts to preserve his religion and culture in the Tsarist Russia of the early 1900s, while Walter tries to preserve a tradition he borrowed from his ex-wife’s ancestors (not his own Polish ancestors). On another level, he defines his religious faith through popular culture, via a stage musical’s version of Jewish life. Walter also quotes the founder of modern Israel Theodore Hertzel’s slogan, “if you will it, it is no dream”. This slogan points to the American belief in the ability to concretize the American dream or in Walter’s case, to become a devout “Jewish, ex-Catholic Polish-American Vietnam War Veteran” who ironically respects the “tenets of National Socialism” because “at least it’s an ethos.” (Keyes, 2006: 12) Likewise, the first record the Dude sees at Maude Lebowski’s house is by the Barry Sisters, a pair of Jewish singers (popular from 1940-1960) visually demonstrating a connection to American Jewish culture; it is the type of record that the family in *A Serious Man* (2009) would listen to, as would the Coen brothers growing up. The record "At Home With the Barry Sisters" is like Walter's exclamation: "Jewish as fucking Tevye": both are superficial signs of Judaism in an equally superficial community.

Bowling and Sex

Jesus Quintana (John Turturro) first appears dressed in purple (the color of Divinity), moving with agile grace; his bowling expertise inspires awe in his opponents. Sex in the bowling alley is embodied by him; he licks his bowling ball very explicitly, polishes it in a spread-legged position with the ball hanging directly over his crotch and threatens Walter with fornication while making the corresponding gestures. When the Dude incredulously uses the exclamation "Jesus," in response to Quintana’s threat, Quintana counters with "you said it, man," making the connection with Jesus Christ explicit. At the same time, Quintana's divinity is negated by the revelation that he is a registered sex offender, a convicted pedophile (anyone claiming the role of messiah probably should not be trusted). Jesus is a pathetic fantasist who, like Walter, is potentially dangerous to the community from which he is alienated.

In Westerns, sex in the saloons was always connected with the chorus girls, who were, more often than not, prostitutes as well. Surrealist as it may seem, in *The Big Lebowski* there are also chorus girls (a parody of Busby Berkeley). In the Dude's second dream sequence, a parody of a pornographic film, called *The Dude and Maude Lebowski in Gutterballs*. A bowling pin floats horizontally on screen and then inserts itself between two golden bowling balls - an obvious penetration symbol. The Dude dressed as a tiny cable-repair man sees Maude in a bowling alley wearing "an armored breastplate…Norse headgear, [she] has braided pigtails, and holds a trident." The Dude goes behind Maude and places his hand around her waist and guides her arm in bowling. He thrusts towards her sexually and when the ball is thrown the Dude's point of view becomes that of a bowling ball (as in the first dream sequence of the flying carpet) sexually heading down a bowling alley between the legs of the chorus girls and spinning around to look up their skirts. This dream sequence then turns into a nightmare with the German nihilists brandishing large scissors and threatening to castrate the Dude. This sequence seems to be a cross between Busby Berkeley and bad Salvador Dali. Bowling is strongly linked to sexuality in both the Dude's dreams, perhaps the pleasure obtained by playing, functions, for the three friends, as a substitute for sex, since they do not seem to have any other relationships in their lives.

"Sex. The physical act of love. Coitus."

The troubles begin because of a rug, but behind the trouble is a woman, and as the plot progresses, it is revealed that the greatest threat to masculinity is not other men, but other women. Maude and Bunny Lebowski, while being very different from each other, are strong independent women (very much like the Sternwood sisters in *The Big Sleep*). One uses her sexuality to get whatever she wants from men and the other is capable of fulfilling all her own needs without men – the only exception being her use of the Dude for conception. The second rug belongs to Maude Lebowski, she gave it as a gift to her mother, which significantly defines it as female territory. According to Lisa Donald, in her article "Bowling, Gender and Emasculation in *The Big Lebowski*", the rug is also inevitably tied to the female gender because "rug" in slang refers to the female

genitalia. (2006:n.p.) Maude is comparable to Marge in *Fargo*, in both films a woman is the only character with an overview of the situation and a sure understanding of her own capabilities. (Körte and Seesslen, 1999:201) She represents the modern woman with her newfound strength, independence and abilities. Maude's "vaginal" art has lead to her social and economic success, making her significantly more powerful than the Dude. Due to the shift in gender roles since the sixties, modern man's sense of purpose and masculinity seems to be drifting in the eighties. Maude understands and takes advantage of this debilitating male psychology by engaging sexually with the Dude for the sole purpose of conception, telling him: "Look, Jeffrey, I don't want a partner. In fact I don't want the father to be someone I have to see socially, or who'll have any interest in rearing the child himself." To this, the Dude again responds with passive silence and acceptance, thereby acknowledging that he still adheres to the white male heterosexual code. In a true reversal of stereotypes, Maude has the Dude medically evaluated and then sleeps with him only to get herself pregnant: a man is used and discarded as a sexual object by a woman. Maude comically stands for radical feminism. She embraces nudity and tries to use language to make the Dude uncomfortable albeit with no success. Maude also represents the avant-garde of which the Dude has no understanding – and is mocked by the Coens for this i.e. she is another aberrant California type, albeit an autonomous one.

The "Square Community"

Most Westerns have the authorized law on show in them, usually in the form of the Sheriff. Mostly, this character is a good man and a law-abiding citizen, but sometimes he is mean and corrupt, the corrupt sheriff Little Bill Daggett (Gene Hackman) in Clint Eastwood's counterculture Western *Unforgiven* (1992) comes to mind. In *The Big Lebowski* there is also a Sheriff / Chief of Police (Leon Russom). As the Chief talks about Jackie Treehorn and how good he is to his community, the Dude unsuccessfully tries to tell him that Treehorn is not a very nice man, that he is fake (like so many other characters in this film):

CHIEF Mr. Treehorn tells us that he had to eject you from his garden party, that you were drunk and abusive.

DUDE That guy treats women like objects, man.

CHIEF Mr. Treehorn draws a lot of water in this town, Lebowski. You don't draw shit. We got a nice quiet beach community here, and I aim to keep it nice and quiet. So let me make something plain. I don't like you sucking around bothering our citizens, Lebowski. I don't like your jerk-off name, I don't like your jerk-off face, I don't like your jerk-off behavior, and I don't like you, jerk-off --do I make myself clear?

The Dude stares.

DUDE I'm sorry, I wasn't listening.

The Chief then becomes violent, hitting the Dude, making it clear whose side he is on. A trusted member of the "square community", Jackie Treehorn is a big loan shark, and pornographer, with police protection (reminiscent of Eddie Mars in *The Big Sleep)*. The "Malibu Beach community" represents an apparently civilized community, if it can be called that at all. It is an exclusionary community, which of course is a smokescreen for arrogance, intolerance, and selfishness. It is also a bordered community where outsiders enter by invitation only and hippies like the Dude and his friends are not welcome. As previously mentioned at the beginning of this work, 'community' presupposes that the members of a group have something in common with each other; in this case it seems to be money and sex which distinguishes them from other groups. Whereas the virtual community at the bowling alley functions as an inclusionary community, this beach community is exclusionary and deceitful. Just as is the old Lebowski's whole life within his "square community". He is embezzling from the Lebowski Foundation to obtain money to keep up appearances; he lies to his daughter; and he tries to deceive the Dude using him in a scam to get rid of his wife Bunny. Comparatively, even though the Dude is a liberal idealist, he is not deceitful and he does not betray his beliefs: friendship, modest private property, at least his (his residence, his car); he considers himself a respectable citizen; he does not care about power, success or work but he is concerned with his bowling performance in the next competition. The Dude is totally authentic, emotionally stable, speaks his mind and emerges unscathed. He does not offer guidance but he bears his modicum of responsibility for other people, although he actually seems a little scared when Maude tells him she wants to have his

child, he is never aggressive, unlike the members of the square/conservative community or the avant-garde groups (who are into the mutilation of self and others). Despite the Dude's lack of planning and his absence of ambition, he manages to give his contribution to the good of the community. He is not a typical Western hero but in this decadent world, he comes the closest to one.

"Welp, that about does her, wraps her all up."

The Dude only solves the case with clues obtained as byproducts of his appetites and self-interests. Maude Lebowski goes to the Dude's bungalow to seduce him. He gets out of bed and notices that Maude lies in bed cradling her legs, she calmly informs him that this increases her chances of conception and also happens to mention that her father does not have any fortune, he only gets an allowance. As it turns out, there never was a million dollars in the briefcase. This is similar to other Coen motifs (the box in *Barton Fink* comes to mind) the viewer never gets to see the content of the briefcase, perhaps it is just another version of the American Dream, of striking it rich. As for Bunny Lebowski, she had just gone on vacation without telling anyone, the green nail polished toe which was sent to the old Lebowski actually belonged to a German nihilist. The Dude and Walter pay a visit to the handicapped Lebowski in order to expose him. There Walter proceeds to throw Lebowski violently on the floor and insult him, while crying on the carpet, Lebowski screams*: "*Stay away from me! You bullies! You and these women! You won't leave a man his fucking balls!" (a crossover between the masculinity crisis themes and the threatening of castration by the nihilists). And the friends go bowling again. When they leave the bowling alley, the Dude's car has been set on fire by the nihilists, who think that Bunny is still missing and continue to demand the ransom money. Shy Donny asks: "Are these the Nazis?" Walter replies, "No these men are nihilists. There's nothing to be afraid of …These men are cowards." When the Dude tells them that Bunny is back and there is no money, the nihilists complain: "His girlfriend gafe up her toe! She sought we'd be getting million dollars! Iss not fair!" While making fun of them, Walter identifies the nihilists' hypocrisy: "Fair? Who's the fucking nihilist here? What are you, a bunch o' fucking crybabies?" They fight and Donny dies of a heart attack. As in many Westerns a man gets

killed in the final confrontation in front of the saloon / bowling alley and sometimes, it is a good man. The conclusion offered by the Stranger hangs on the notion of a regeneration which perpetuates society, no matter how unconventional the method of reproduction:

> The Dude abides. I don't know about you, but I take comfort in that. It's good knowin' he's out there, the Dude, takin' her easy for all us sinners. Shoosh. I sure hope he makes The finals. Welp, that about does her, wraps her all up. Things seem to've worked out pretty good for the Dude'n Walter, and it was a purt good story, dontcha think? Made me laugh to beat the band. Parts, anyway. Course--I didn't like seein' Donny go. But then, happen to know that there's a little Lebowski on the way. I guess that's the way the whole durned human comedy keeps perpetuatin' it-self, down through the generations, westward the wagons, across the sands a time until-- aw, look at me, I'm ramblin' again. Wal, uh hope you folks enjoyed yourselves.

Just when it seems that the events that occurred might have destroyed a fragmented community, already in crisis, this virtual community somehow survives, assimilates the events, and returns to “normalcy”. At the end of *The Big Lebowski,* the narrator handles Donny's death by a universal appeal to the comedy of life. Donny's death is somehow alleviated by the fact that “there's a little Lebowski on the way”.

The Lebowski Cult – promoting community

Exactly because the Dude lacks the attributes of the traditional hero (strength, courage and intellect), he has become an iconic figure in modern America. There are many fan sites for *The Big Lebowski* and the Dude is admired and respected specifically for challenging the tired hero-archetypes. On its release in 1998, *The Big Lebowski* was not one of the Coens’ most successful films. Four years later, the film’s fan following, the Lebowski cult got started and has not stopped growing in popularity since then.

A Church of the Latter-Day Dude, which is described on its homepage as a “philosophy that preaches non-preachiness and practices as little as possible…” has been founded by Oliver Benjamin. “Dudeism” has already attracted more than 70,000 official adherents through an “online ordination

process". According to *The Guardian* columnist, Ben Walters, it has become "the new century's most devout movie cult and the Dude its godhead" (2010: n.p.). This cult following is still strong thirteen years after the film was released and it has spread to Europe (at least to England and Holland) as well. Lebowski fests are held in many cities throughout the United States each year and attended by thousands of fans. Articles on the Lebowski fests have appeared in newspapers, such as *The Guardian*, *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal*. A *Big Lebowski* academic conference entitled, *The Lebowski Cult: An Academic Symposium* (with topics such as Lacan, Freud, information-seeking, ritual and masculinity) was held in Louisville, Kentucky in 2006 and was sponsored by the Universities of Louisville and Indiana.

The two common themes connecting the film and the Lebowski cult are deception and the detection of deception. *The Big Lebowski* also contains elements of carnival and thus lends itself to the carnival-like activities at a Lebowski fest. At Lebowski fests people drink White Russians, dress up in costumes and dance. As described by Mikhail Bakhtin, carnival "is the place for working out, in a concretely sensuous, half-real and half-play-acted form, *a new mode of interrelating between individuals*, counter-posed to the all-powerful socio-hierarchical relationships of non-carnival life" (English Translation, 1984: 123). Carnival, then, is used as a vehicle of social critique, but having said that, human beings still crave ritual and the feeling of community it provides.

Chapter Four: *No Country for Old Men* (2007)

"Who are these people?"

In the "Bonus Features" of the DVD, the short documentary "The Making of *No Country*" opens with a montage of cast and crew attempting to classify the film in a genre. The suggestions range from Western to crime, neo-noir, horror, road movie, and even comedy. The sequence concludes with actress Kelly MacDonald stating appropriately "It's a Coen brothers' film: they're their own genre." Having said that, this film is considered one more step in the brother's cinematic effort to say something about their country and about being a citizen of that vast country, the United States of America. As I have tried to show, the Coen brothers are usually interested in telling very American stories. To do this in *No Country for Old Men* they follow mostly an American genre, the Western, but a postmodern Western. This film too, subverts genre expectations, as the Coens bring their characteristic inverted sense of Americana to a contemporary Western. On the one hand, references to traditional Westerns and to the history of the region arise periodically in the film, as well as images of pointy boots, the "bad guy" dressed in dark, shots of hats, horses and guns. On the other hand, even though it takes place in the West and its main characters are Westerners, the action revolves around a drug deal that has gone wrong, which is not a typical Western plot. Moreover, the iconic images symbolizing modern crime like the four-wheel-drive vehicles, automatic guns, flash-lights, telephones, motel rooms and executives in high-rise buildings do not belong in a Western either. There is a parody with the air-tank cattle gun normally used to slaughter cattle and which is now being used to kill human beings. Yet, siding with the cast, this film is also a road movie; there is a vast and wild primitive country through which the protagonists wander. It is a road movie as well in the sense that there is no escape possible, from the moment the protagonist decides to grab the briefcase, his chance at the "get-rich-quick" scheme.

The opening scene inaugurates the spirit of demythologization, as it also roots itself in the Western. The pacing, the atmosphere, the harsh landscape and the attention to detail produce an effect likely to induce viewers into imagining cowboys riding the open plains. Since the 19th century, Texas has

been associated with the image of the cowboy. The serious cowboy voiceover (unlike in *The Big Lebowski* where it is more ironic) here is done by Sheriff Bell (Tommy Lee Jones), his words are juxtaposed against still, long empty shots of Texas (the Chihuahuan Desert) as he narrates how he is part of an ancient tradition of lawmen and he identifies with the old timers:

> Some of the old-time sheriffs never even wore a gun. A lot of folks find that hard to believe. …I always like to hear about the old-timers. Never missed a chance to do so. You can't help but compare yourself against the old-timers. Can't help but wonder how they would've operated these times.

The dialogue simultaneously communicates nostalgia for older times and discouragement with the present, which seems to be reinforced by the Sheriff's tone of voice. By the end of the film, it will be clear indeed that this is no country for old Western myths. For Sheriff Bell the world and its communal standards have collapsed, and he is vulnerable through powerful memories of the past: in those days a sheriff did not need to wear a gun and would know everyone's phone number by heart. He tries to protect his community but he comes to realize that it, too, is "part of this world". Bell attempts to help Llewelyn Moss (Josh Brolin) and his wife Carla Jean (Kelly MacDonald) but they are naïve about what they are facing and by the time Bell figures out all of the clues it is too late, paralleling his arrival at the crime scenes, usually two or three steps behind.

This is a more serious film, compared to other Coen films, or at least serious in a more conventional way. They have previously undertaken dark themes, but prior to this film there was always a certain level of detachment or irony. Here the Coens have given up a certain ironic detachment; there is irony but not like in *Fargo*. A possible reason for this might be that this is their first movie based on a novel. The script follows Cormac McCarthy's novel (2005) almost scene for scene, the camera showing what the book describes: a parched, empty landscape; pickup trucks; taciturn men; and lots of killing. When interviewed by Michael Ordoña about the story, Joel Coen states,

> In certain ways, it can't be told without an emphasis on the landscape it takes place in. It's important to understanding the story, to the telling of the story, making it specific in the right ways as far as the characters are concerned. I think [McCarthy] once described it as natural history. . . he's

> interested in the natural history of that region, and the people who inhabit it are in a sense the flora and fauna and you have to understand them in the context of the region -- even though what I think the story's about in many ways is universal and not limited to that. …and we knew that area a little bit, which was part of what drew us to the story. (2008: n.p.)

This seems to reflect an evolution in their storytelling and cinematic concerns. The Coens seem to be becoming more direct, more responsible, giving up their habitual posture of invulnerability and ironic detachment, in order to say something more straightforward about their perceptions of how their country is going. It is as if there has been a progression, as if the level of urgency has risen from *Fargo*, where criminals were still caught by routine police work.

Their previous film which has most in common with *No Country for Old Men* is, in fact, *Fargo.* There is in both an older and wiser police chief and a less experienced deputy driven by a sense of duty. Here too, a small town, a remote and peaceful community, is confronted with some ghastly murders committed by men from out of town. The characters at these two extremes share little, if any, mutual understanding. Although some law-abiding characters seem to understand the dangers of the unpredictable world that threatens to draw them into its nightmare territory. In both films greed lies behind the plots and one of the protagonists is a cold-blooded killer who does not seem to be quite human and whom the police chief seeks to apprehend. Contrastively, no one in *Fargo* has much of a sense of irony, although the movie itself is ironic, whereas Sheriff Ed Tom Bell, for example, certainly does have the intelligence to see irony even if the film *No Country for Old Men* does not feel ironic at all. A revealing moment of Bell's irony takes place when he reads a story from the newspaper to his younger deputy, Wendell (Garret Dillahunt):

> My lord, Wendell, it's just all-out war. I don't know any other word for it. Who are these people? I don't know ...Here last week they found this couple out in California they would rent out rooms to old people and then kill em and bury em in the yard and cash their social security checks. They'd torture them first, I don't know why. Maybe their television set was broke. And this went on until, and here I quote...
>
> ..."Neighbors were alerted when a man ran from the premises wearing only a dog collar." You can't make up such a thing as that. I dare you to even

try. ...But that's what it took, you'll notice. Get someone's attention. Diggin graves in the back yard didn't bring any.

Wendell bites back a smile. Sheriff Bell gazes at him over his glasses for a long beat, deadpan.

...That's all right. I laugh myself sometimes. ...There ain't a whole lot else you can do.

Sheriff Bell recognizes the absurdity at work in this world; he feels overwhelmed with the crimes being committed. This is a bittersweet confession that shows how humanity may be part of the irony. His comment, “I laugh myself sometimes,” seems to link this nonironic movie with all of the Coen brothers’ ironic movies, movies in which horrors (a Ku Klux Klan rally in *Oh Brother, Where art Thou?*; a hooded kidnapped woman trying to run blindly from her would be killers in *Fargo*; or the chopping off of a woman’s green nail-polished toe in *The Big Lebowski*) are treated humorously.

Bell’s character forms part of a triangle which includes Llewlyn Moss who foolishly, but understandably, steals the money from the failed deal. The other third of the triangle is Anton Chigurh (Javier Bardem), murderous and implacable. While Moss attempts to keep the 2.4 million dollars for himself, Chigurh tries to recover it from him and Sheriff Bell tries to interrupt Chigurh's ruthless murder trail. Curiously enough, the three main characters never have scenes together and the narrative shifts focus away whenever one of them seems to be taking centre stage. The fact that no scene in the film includes any of the protagonists together further accentuates their physical and psychological disconnection from one another.

This film takes place in 1980 and it returns to the country of the brothers' first film *Blood Simple* (1984), the hostile / barren territory of Texas exteriorizing the attitude of a country that's "hard on people". If *Blood Simple*'s stupid Ray (John Getz) traps himself in a net of deceit and homicide when he decides to clear up a murder scene for which he mistakenly believes his lover is responsible, Llewelyn Moss, too, places his and his wife’s lives in danger through an ill-considered act of altruism. On the other hand, and differently from other Coen movies, here it is possible, at times, to identify with Moss. While the audience might be divided about what he should do with the money, everyone

wants Moss to survive, and that is curious in itself, to be siding with an opportunistic criminal.

The title of the novel *No Country for Old Men* by Cormac McCarthy (2005) upon which the film is based, is borrowed from the first line of the poem by William Butler Yeats “Sailing to Byzantium” (1960). This poem is about the pathos of a changing world to which the old cannot adapt: the world moves on and human beings are not able to move with it, and as such it represents a good choice for the title. As directors who tend to offer some optimism, even in their most subdued films, the Coens here seem prepared to accept the gloomy and sour conclusion McCarthy reaches in his novel. That is, as Chigurh pursues Moss and Bell pursues both of them into gradually more atrocious and nasty circumstances, the cruel acknowledgement is made that kindness and human bonding are in crisis in an increasingly heartless country.

In this landscape of west Texas, and the Wild West in general, wild men “take” what they want without asking and easily kill anyone who steps in their way. Drug dealing is a modern version of the lawlessness that has always been associated with the West (especially in classic Hollywood cinema). However the social context is vastly different. Due to its geographic location, Mexico has long been used as a crossroads for narcotics destined for American markets. During the 1980s the Colombian drug organizations formed partnerships with the Mexican traffickers to transport cocaine through Mexico into the United States. The fighting between rival drug cartels began in earnest after the 1989 arrest of an ex-police officer who ran the cocaine business in Mexico. Despite the violence between drug cartels lasting for decades, only in 2006 did the Mexican government - pressure by the American government - become involved in fighting the drug cartels, starting the “Mexican Drug War”. Currently, support from the population is declining as a result of innocent deaths. Although mass graves in Mexico are not a new phenomenon, in the past they were only filled with members of criminal organizations, however, now the graves are filled with the bodies of civilians (Longmire, 2011: n.p.). Paralleling this state of affairs in the United States drug related crimes have suffered a large increase during the last thirty years. In the novel Sheriff Bell asserts “I think if you were Satan and you were settin around tryin to think up somethin that would just bring the human race to its knees what you would probably come up with is narcotics”.

(McCarthy, 2005: 218) It seems to me that because of the invasive violence of the Mexican border region and the disintegration of a society where drugs seem to have penetrated at every level; the Coens have sided with Cormac McCarthy in giving this western a tragic, existential, *film noir* ending. “Who *are* these people?” the sheriff asks, while the Coens answer: they are ordinary Americans.

“You can say it's my job to fight it but I don't know what it is anymore.”

This film might remind one of the “classical” Western *High Noon* (1952), with Sheriff Bell resembling Marshal Will Kane (Gary Cooper) in Fred Zinnemann’s film. Both men are about to retire and not as confident in their abilities as they once were. “An aged man is but a paltry thing,/ a tattered coat upon a stick” (1983: 193, lines 9-10) as Yeats states in his second stanza; Sheriff Bell is one of the dispossessed old men implied by the title, as well as being the spokesman for old-time ideals and community values. As mentioned before, the film opens with the flat, confiding voiceover of Bell as he reminisces about the past and wonders how the old timers would have dealt with today’s crime and criminals which seem to have hit new depths of depravity. To illustrate his point he proceeds to describe a young killer he once sent to the electric chair:

> The papers described it as a crime of passion. My arrest and my testimony. He killed a fourteen-year-old girl. Papers said it was a crime of passion but he told me there wasn't any passion to it. Told me that he'd been planning to kill somebody for about as long as he could remember. Said that if they turned him out he'd do it again. Said he knew he was going to hell. Be there in about fifteen minutes. I don't know what to make of that. I surely don't.

This voiceover sets up the entire film, which regards an increasingly immoral society with wonderment, as if astonished that such unmotivated malignancy could exist. Bell belongs to the land, to the country, which in this film is as important as a character. This is a primitive landscape, a survivalist landscape, not a picturesque landscape. As Sheriff Bell narrates what he goes through in trying to figure out his place in the country, he simultaneously considers the evolution of the West. Interrupting his tale are his thoughts on goodness, the

decline of polite society, and whether basic virtues like kindness and respect retain influence.

In many ways, Bell is the polar opposite of Chigurh, claiming “I never had to kill nobody and I am very glad of that fact.” But Bell is aware of how easy it is to just become part of the jungle, to illustrate that differences can be transitory they also seem to be connected. By lamenting the changing times, he too wants things to “hold still” (like Moss and Chigurh). Curiously, he drinks from the same bottle of milk still sweating from Chigurh’s having only moments earlier removed it from the refrigerator, while sitting exactly on the same sofa in Moss’s abandoned trailer. Bell’s reflection with his cowboy hat is projected on the dead screen of the television set in exactly the same way as Chigurh’s. When Bell’s deputy Wendell says “Sheriff, we just missed him! We gotta circulate this! On the radio!” the Sheriff asks him “What do we circulate: *Looking for a man who has recently drunk milk?*” This is a description which applies to Bell himself, as his suggestion ironically seems to declare. A truly preposterous moment which conveys the irrationality of their situation: the law is becoming more and more powerless against such an unruly society. Similar to his counterpart Marge (in *Fargo*) this motiveless inordinate mayhem is a paradox to Bell – represented by the suitcases of cash in the snow, or in the sand.

Bell sees, in the violence generated by the drug trade, a new kind of criminal and a new order of lawlessness: “I just have this feelin we’re looking at something we really aint never seen before.” Many brutal crimes in the eighties resulted from the “across the border drug trade” between the United States and Mexico because very high sums of money were involved. McCarthy in his novel pauses for moments of rationalization: “fortunes bein accumulated out there that they don’t nobody even know about. What do we think is goin to come of that money? Money that can buy whole countries.” (303) The Coens rely on the images. It is important in this respect that the film shows bloody money being exchanged to a bystander on three separate occasions. Moss gives five hundred dollars to a teenager for his coat, and when Moss asks the youth to include the beer he wants to negotiate a price for it as well. Later on, Llewellyn gives one hundred dollars to a band of mariachis to take him to a doctor. Each time there is a focus on the money, it is always crumpled and soiled with blood. The motif continues after Chigurh is unexpectedly hit by a car and suffers a

fracture in his arm. Two kids pull up on their bicycles and Chigurh offers one a bloody bill for his shirt to use as a sling: “Take it,” Chigurh says, “Take it and you didn’t see me. I was already gone.” “Yessir,” says the boy. The shot dissolves as the kids argue: “You know part of that’s mine.” “You still got your damn shirt,” snaps the other. The next shot is the final scene with the Sheriff and his wife at the breakfast table. The kid’s “Yessir” lingering on from the last scene has a haunting irony, insinuating the return of good manners but in support of the wrong institution: an ethic devoid of any morality. Indeed, a society where even children swap money to cover up blood, points to a crisis that reaches far beyond the figure of Chigurh.

Anton Chigurh for Bell is like “a ghost”, he is a total mystery. The Sheriff never sees him, and time after time finds him “already gone”, when he arrives – at the car fire early in the film, at Llewelyn and Carla Jean’s trailer, at the carnage in the desert, and at the motel after Moss is killed. Besides slipping away so easily, he leaves strange clues – like hollowed-out lock cylinders, flaming cars, and victims shot in the head with neither exit wounds nor bullets. The Sheriff cannot understand Chigurh (very much like Marge Gunderson in *Fargo*) and the new kind of unstoppable violence that he portrays: a violence without any logical explanation. In the opening narration, he confesses, “The crime you see now, it’s hard to even take its measure. … I don’t want to push my chips forward and go out and meet something I don’t understand. A man would have to put his soul at hazard. He’d have to say, ‘Ok, I’ll be part of this world.’” This is an important point: the Sheriff is willing to die to do his job, however it is the worry that operating so far beyond the level of his competence will soil his inner self like a contamination, swallowing up any morals he has left. This is a man who feels grief as the killings escalate beyond his ability to curtail them. He feels worthless confronted with the general crisis around him and with an impossible battle to win. Bell conscientiously lags behind the investigation, and avoids putting himself in harm's way, sending his deputy, Wendell on ahead: “Gun out and up.” Wendell asks hesitatingly “What about yours?” to which the Sheriff replies “I'm hidin behind you.” If Chirgurh represents the lunacy and violence of an America in crisis, Bell is its unwilling defender and “paltry thing” of a guide. This is another radical departure from expectation as the forces of law and justice eventually shrink from confronting evil as Bell puts

it: “Somewhere out there is a true and living prophet of destruction, and I don't want to confront him.” He adds, "I ain't sure we've seen these people before. Their kind. I don't know what to do about ‘em even. If you killed ‘em all they'd have to build an annex onto hell." The impotence of traditional law is completely exposed when the Sheriff is unable to reach Llewelyn in time to help or protect him. That he guesses Chigurh will return to the crime scene in the motel room where Moss is killed and then goes there himself expecting to confront him shows that it is not the dangerous Chigurh that he fears most, but the evil forces of greed unleashed by the drug traffic. Still, Sheriff Bell cannot imagine that Chigurh, having captured the drug money, with Moss and Wells both dead, would go back and kill Carla Jean simply because he had vowed to do so. Consequently, all these factors convince Bell that he is “overmatched” so he decides to retire and spend his remaining time with his wife.

The news disappoints his uncle Ellis (Barry Corbin), a retired lawman, now disabled on account of having been shot in the line of duty. Bell visits his uncle, who lives alone in a remote western locale. Dusty road, windmill, cowboy hat, overalls, rocking chair – Americana here is in full force to conjure up the Old West. Ellis tells Bell a story about his great uncle, Mac, also a lawman: in 1909, Mac was shot on his porch by a group of Indians and left to die in front of his wife Ella. “She buried him the next day. Digging in that hard caliche.” He continues: “What you got ain’t nothin’ new. This country’s hard on people. Hard and crazy. Got the devil in it yet folks never seem to hold it to account. […] You can’t stop what’s comin’. Ain’t all waitin’ on you.[…]That’s vanity”. An identical scene takes place in *High Noon*, when Will Kane visits the old Sheriff Martin Howe (Lon Chaney Jr.) to ask him for help and he cynically answers with “You risk your skin catching killers and the juries turn them loose so they can come back and shoot at you again. If you're honest you're poor your whole life and in the end you wind up dying all alone on some dirty street. For what? For nothing. For a tin star.” This feels like a parody on what the Western has taught us about the past as simpler times. *No Country for Old Men* claims there never was a time of Hollywood simplicity where good and evil were seen clearly; in fact, the caliche was just as hard then as it is today. In the end death will get everyone, whether by destiny or chance, that is insignificant. Even so, the mythology persists due to a natural tendency for nostalgia: to think that the past was so

much different and better compared to the present. It persists to the point of disturbing Bell's dreams, which he goes on to share with his wife Loretta (Tess Harper) in the final scene. The dream takes place in older times, with him and his father riding horseback through a mountain pass at night. It's hard riding – dark, cold and snowing. His father rides past,

> carryin' fire in a horn the way people used to do. … And in the dream I knew that he was goin' on ahead […] fixin' to make a fire […] out there in all that dark and all that cold, and I knew whenever I got there he would be there. Out there up ahead. And then I woke up.

The dream is likened to the film, Bell always arrives second, a little too late. The camera remains close-up on the discouraged Bell for a few moments as the ticking clock is amplified and then the film cuts to credits. Though Bell cannot abide the ruling of Uncle Ellis and the spirits of the past, he cannot help but hear their chorus of voices. Even if these voices speak a mythology quite different from reality, perhaps believing in them provides an illusion of safety. Sheriff Bell is the conscience of this film and the old order that he represents is being rapidly replaced by a modern unruly society. However, Bell's recognition goes beyond the fact that Texas in 1980 is no place for an old man, it is deeper and more disturbing than that, it is no place for young men either. One can read in his eyes that he believes there will be no fire waiting in the darkness. The sound of the ticking clock that closes the film seems to suggest that only time will tell.

"Things happened. I can't take 'em back."

Llewelyn Moss is a typical westerner; his "cowboy" identity is quickly established by his clothing and behavior. He is not afraid of death or dying and when he comes across the shoot out in the desert, with many dead bodies lying around invoking a battlefield, he does not flinch once, he is only cautious. Later on, he is determined to continue doing what he intended to do in spite of his severe wounds and possible death ahead. Like Sheriff Bell, who is also a Westerner, he knows that to do his task he must accept the possibility of his own death. He is also a man of few words. Perhaps because they are mostly tough doers instead of talkers, they relate to the idea of fate and inevitability. That what has been done cannot be undone, that decisions made cannot be unmade, and that both acts and decisions have unavoidable consequences. But

he is also an inversion of the Western cliché; Moss is frequently seen running from his pursuers. He loses his pick-up truck, never has a horse or any other vehicle, and travels by taxi everywhere. In Westerns, the protagonist is usually heroic, but Moss has no heroic moments and spends most of the film wounded, weakened or disabled. While in Westerns there were no gray moral areas, a man was either good or evil, here men are ordinary, Bell recognizes he is not perfect while Moss regards his act of mercy as one of his stupid actions.

From the start, the Coens agreed they needed someone who looks like a “cowboy” to play Llewelyn Moss. Josh Brolin was chosen exactly because he worked on a ranch in his younger years and knew well the strong and silent Texas brand of masculinity required for the part (“The Making of *No Country*”, 2008) while Tommy Lee Jones and Woody Harrelson are actually Texans. Moss is another ordinary man who gets caught up in extraordinary circumstances. He belongs to the class depreciatively known in America as “poor-white-trash”. Moss is a welder living with his wife, Carla Jean who works at Wal-Mart (a true *Coenesque* cliché), in a Texas trailer-home. One day, while hunting for antelope in the desert, Llewelyn comes across a drug deal gone wrong. The modern vehicles are sorted in a circle like in an old-fashioned wagon train. Practically everyone on the scene is dead; the sole Mexican survivor is incapacitated. Even the dog has been shot. In the back of a pick-up truck are neatly stacked bags of heroin. Llewelyn realizes that there is only one thing missing: the money. He finds it in a briefcase on the sand next to a man who made it as far as the shade of a lonely tree before dying. Here the honorable cowboy vanishes as Moss the modern opportunist emerges, he chooses to steal the money, and thus sets in motion a chain of events which cannot be stopped.

Llewelyn is an intelligent, competent and passionate man. These characteristics are what lead him to the “last man standing” and to the money. But because he is also a compassionate man, he returns to the site of the drug deal to bring water to the dying Mexican man who asked for it. "All right," Moss mutters to himself, lying awake in bed next to his sleeping wife. A few hours earlier he hid the briefcase containing the money. He decides to take some water to the sole survivor. As he fills a gallon jug, Carla Jean comes sleepily into the kitchen and asks what her husband is doing. "Fixin' to do somethin'

dumber 'n' hell, but I'm goin anyways" he tells her, an exchange which seems to sum up the protagonist's credo of all Coen brothers' films. Of course he is right: by returning to the scene he exposes himself to the people searching for the money and brings about the manhunt which leads to the destruction of his and Carla Jean's life. Resembling Will Kane in *High Noon* he puts himself at risk because of his loyalty to a set of values.

Conventional narrative models demand an obstacle between the hero and the object of his desire; in Coen country, that obstacle is usually the hero's hilarious stupidity. There is the obtuseness of the protagonist of *Barton Fink*, the emotional deficiency of Ed Crane in *The Man Who Wasn't There* or the lovable idiocy of the Dude in *The Big Lebowski*. As one of the protagonists of *No Country for Old Men*, Moss stands above his counterparts for at least recognizing from the start that he is going to do something stupid. Moss is another Vietnam veteran, and as such he is a man of considerable resources, but in his daily life these resources are not put to use. Besides intelligence and determination he also has certain abilities which he learned in Vietnam. Although he has a young wife and a comfortable trailer home, he has no obvious way of improving his situation beyond this level of comfort. In many ways he appears happy, but it seems difficult to have powers that you have no opportunities to use. Moss wants to improve his life, he wants better things for himself and his wife. As Gilmore states "Doing pretty well in America has never been the happiest of options if there is some chance that you could be doing better." (Conard, 2009: 62) The possibility of doing better turns into reality for Llewelyn when he finds the briefcase full of money. He does not even think twice, he sacrifices everything he has for a fleeting promise.

The first scene of Llewelyn hunting and being able to shoot the antelope in a leg as he runs away is representative. He is a competent hunter: the sight adjustments, using the boot as a barrel rest, and his patience, all reveal his competency and his ability. But this scene also shows that he only wounds the animal which is a bad outcome for a good hunter, maybe an evil omen of things to come. He is frustrated and goes in pursuit of the antelope trying to finish the job, which he never does. His aim is good but not good enough, the film seems to suggest, as a preview of future events. Llewelyn's talents as well as his misjudgments besides certain implacable facts of nature will make him fail. His

mistake is not only taking the money, but believing that he has the survival skills to get away with it. Quoting Joel Coen about this film, from the previously mentioned bonus DVD feature, “It’s about a good guy, a bad guy, and a guy in-between. Moss is the guy in-between.” (“The Making of *No Country*,” 2008). Moss might be said to accurately represent an ordinary modern citizen, a person who wants his share of America’s prosperity and is willing to sacrifice his principles to get it. He goes hunting in the desert but loses his way and ultimately his moral bearings when he stumbles into temptation and becomes part of the jungle that Bell fears. He betrays his values for greed. As the story progresses his chances for survival diminish. When Llewelyn is seriously wounded and flees to Mexico he is awoken by three mariachis, who appropriately sing about an allegory of greed:

Quisiste volar sin alas,
quisiste tocar el cielo,
quisiste muchas riquezas,
quisiste jugar con fuego,
y ahora te diste cuenta…

Eventually, Moss will lose everything as well, resembling a character in a Greek tragedy who suffers from hubris.

The Coens seem to be recording a trajectory of dehumanization. According to Joan Mellen, the brothers present a downward spiral of human character. Moss has been damaged by Vietnam, but he is still affectionate and loyal to his wife, he is capable of caring and of charity. Carson Wells (Woody Harrelson), the bounty hunter hired by the drug cartel to eliminate Chigurh, represents a further step into degeneration. Wells, who also served in Vietnam, while a hired killer, he is more social than Chigurh, and he has instrumental conversations both with Moss and Chigurh. Wells remarks to Moss that Chigurh is “not like you. He’s not even like me.” It is certainly true that neither Chigurh nor Wells would have risked their lives to bring a dying Mexican water, as Moss does. The least fragmented man in the film is Sheriff Bell, he is capable of genuine love in the form of a lasting relationship with his wife Loretta, and he cares for his community. They move from the sheriff, a good but ordinary man, to Moss and Wells, who are “in-between” figures, and then on to the “prophet of destruction”. Seemingly, suggesting that the differences between these

characters are temporary. Besides, what defines the new America, and the evil that Bell “doesn’t understand,” are the similarities, not the differences between Moss and Chigurh. “Hold still please, sir,” Chigurh insists with his second victim. ”You hold still,” Moss whispers to an antelope while hunting. Both seriously wounded, Chigurh and Moss keep going. They move through the film taciturn and expressionless: while Chigurh shows no reaction after he kills Wells, only worrying not to get his boots dirty; Moss shows no reaction to the carnage or when he opens the black briefcase full of hundred dollar bills. Both tend to their own wounds, neither expecting help. Both buy clothing from transient people (2008: 29-30). They are also connected over cuts: Thinking that we are in a taxi with Moss we perceive that it is Chigurh driving a truck. One shot at the Eagle Pass Hotel, near the Mexican border, is from an angle that only pointy boot toes are seen (Western like), whose boots are those, Chigurh’s or Llewelyn’s? Temporarily one is confused: is a scene taking place inside Llewelyn’s hotel room, or outside in the corridor with Chigurh? It is worth noting here that this is pure Coen brothers - this parallel between Chigurh and Moss is not made explicit in the novel by McCarthy.

A very important point is provided by a flirtatious woman who tries to pick up Moss at the El Paso motel. She asks Moss why he is always looking out the window to which he answers “Lookin for what's comin.” And she replies wisely “Yeah, but no one ever sees that.” As Uncle Ellis also tells Bell “You can’t stop what’s comin”, Moss cannot stop the Mexicans, even though he thinks he can. There is no dramatic showdown, Moss just appears dead on the floor of the motel and since the exchange of bullets takes place offscreen he does not get to utter any memorable last words as any true cowboy would.

“When I came into your life your life was over.” (McCarthy, 2005: 260)

Anton Chigurgh seems to be the undefinable “what’s coming”. His character personifies violence itself, the death which cannot be avoided. He is like a moving slaughter-house. People are like cattle to him, which makes his weapon of choice truly appropriate. Chigurh drags around an air tank with a cattle euthanizing device called a captive bolt pistol--a symbol of his philosophy. He is the model of complete self-sufficiency, he seems like a satire of the frontier ethos, the anomalous Latino turned into a killing machine. According to

Sonya Topolnisky, “seeing Chigurh in action is somehow otherworldly, like watching a technologically superior machine. His violent acts are committed coldly and methodically without style or bravado.” (King, 2009: 114)

This "prophet of destruction" appears because he has been hired by the drug cartel to hunt down the missing money. He is summoned because of greed and lust for power. Those who summon him, suffering from hubris, will learn too late that he is a power which cannot be controlled, like a Tsunami in nature. On the other hand, the evil of the man in question is not what interests the Coens, but what happens when good, but ordinary men encounter this force of nature in human guise and there is no community back-up, no social fabric, as society has lost its way.

Chigurh is a self-indulging killer, like his counterparts in *Fargo*, he kills for his convenience, he might kill a person for their car, for information, or for the slightest inconvenience they might cause him. He has an icy cold demeanor, even when smiling, and fills the character with such menace and terror that a question like "What time do you go to bed?" turns into a lethal threat when pronounced by Chigurh, with his peculiar pageboy haircut and sinister smile. This pageboy haircut became typical during the sixties with the Beatles and is not fashionable anymore in the eighties, which illustrates that Chigurh cares nothing for social convention.

Chigurh is a force and a presence that goes way beyond the “banal” paid assassin. He is like death, larger than life. The idea of fear is conveyed, as Joan Mellen suggests, because “the Coens offer rhythmically the extreme high overhead angle. They look down on Chigurh killing a deputy, or cleaning his leg wound in a bathtub... The Coens distance themselves from events that no one has any hope of mediating. The high angle creates an abiding sense that the film itself is frightened of Chigurh.” (2008: 28) But I would add here that an idea of fear is further conveyed in the choice of the actor who plays Chigurh. Unlike the other three Texan-look-alike protagonists, Javier Bardem is Spanish and looks like he could be Mexican. After September 11, 2001, the United States became more xenophobic, and the Coens are taking advantage of that fact. Speculatively, the brothers cast the bad guy as a Mexican murderer, playing with people’s fears of “the Other”, as well as with the growing belief that “in Mexico anything goes”.

Patient, implacable and ultra-capable, Chigurh is also alien, even supernatural in his presumptive superiority. Film critic for *Empire* magazine, Ian Nathan, describes Chigurh well as, “a stone-cold killer obsessed with chance, holding lives to the random toss of a quarter […] his voice seems to come from a place not wholly human.” (2007: n.p.) He gives a Martian's-eye view of American life. The man who knows him best, although not well enough to elude him, the bounty hunter Wells, describes Chigurh to the leader of the drug cartel:

MAN I'd just like to know your opinion of him. In general. Just how dangerous is he?

WELLS Compared to what? The bubonic plague? He's bad enough that you called me. He's a psychopathic killer but so what? There's plenty of them around.

Later in another scene, Wells adds that he lacks a sense of humor. But the smirk that appears on one side of Chigurh’s mouth as he speaks suggests some amusement — he sadistically toys with his victims readying them for the kill — and his conversation has a teasing, riddle-like quality. Evidently all these factors combined only make him all the more sinister. A profound moment in the film takes place between these two characters, when Chigurh asks Carson Wells a great philosophical question before he proceeds to kill him, “If the rule you follow brought you to this, of what use was the rule?” - he is, in fact, asking about the arbitrariness of life and death. As Richard Gilmore states, “It is as though Anton Chigurh comes as a kind of avatar of death, a remnant of the ancient Greek gods, and his function is to undo or to make irrelevant everyone’s [Llewelyn Moss, Carla Jean, Carson Wells and even Sheriff Bell’s] rules.” (Conard, 2009: 65) Chigurh sees himself as simply a tool that completes, not determines one’s destiny. Chigurh seems to follow only one rule. Two scenes are revealing: the first scene takes place with the owner of the gas station (Gene Jones), who in the way of polite conversation annoys Chigurh by asking,

PROPRIETOR Y’all getting any rain up your way?

CHIGURH What way would that be?

PROPRIETOR Well, I seen you was from Dallas.

CHIGURH What business is it of yours where I'm from...friendo?

PROPRIETOR Well, I didn't mean nothing by it.

CHIGURH You didn't mean nothing?

This is a creepy and increasingly hostile conversation, turning into a point where it becomes a life or death situation for the owner of the gas station. When the terrified man says that he is closing up, Chigurh amused asks what time they close. "Now," he says. "We close now." Sadistic and cold enough to kill, Chigurh reminds him that "'now' is not a time." Chigurh proceeds to demand the owner to call a coin toss, almost as if he is looking for a reason to let him live,

PROPRIETOR Well, we need to know what we're calling it for here.

CHIGURH You need to call it. I can't call it for you. Or it wouldn't be fair.

PROPRIETOR I didn't put nothing up.

CHIGURH Yes, you did. You've been putting it up your whole life. You just didn't know it.

After offering some resistance the owner does call a coin toss: “Heads.” Heads it is and Chigurh does not kill him. He tells the proprietor that he must keep the coin as a talisman. As Chigurh leaves, however, he pauses at the door, tilts his head back, and with an ironic and mischievous curl to his lip, takes it all back. The coin could be special, but then again it may be just a coin. This certainly contradicts the notion that Chigurh has no sense of humor. Later in a similar scene with Carla Jean, although the toss is not seen, it is clear when Chigurh checks his boots for blood that she loses the bet and is killed. It is Interesting in these two scenes that Chigurh does have some human desires, but in both cases he subordinates his desires to the coin toss, to chance. In the first scene he really wants to kill the owner of the gas station. In the second scene, it seems he would prefer not to kill Carla Jean, as she is the only one who stands up to him. Chance is his principle, as he tells Carla Jean and it is this principle which makes him invulnerable. When Carson Wells meets up with Llewelyn at the Mexican hospital, he describes Chigurh in a similar way:

WELLS I guess I'd say...that he doesn't have a sense of humor. His name is Chigurh.

MOSS Sugar?

…

MOSS If I was cutting deals, why wouldn't I go deal with this guy Chigurh?

WELLS No no. No. You don't understand You can't make a deal with him. Even if you gave him the money he'd still kill you. He's a peculiar man.

> You could even say that he has principles. Principles that transcend money or drugs or anything like that. He's not like you. He's not even like me.

Llewelyn's incomprehension is foreshadowed when he hears the name of his antagonist for the first time as "Sugar", which is profoundly ironic. No one understands Anton Chigurh completely and that is where his power lies. He is cold and calculating, a true "bubonic plague", a force which cannot be vanquished. Chigurh, like his counterpart Gaer Grimsrud in *Fargo,* is a man with no human connections, nor does he experience their absence. Chigurh is sociopathic and has no concern for others or for charity. Thus, there is no sweetness in his life, even when he leaves his victims alive, like the gas station owner, they feel chilled. Besides, Chigurh leaves few behind to describe him. Chigurh expects nothing for himself from anyone, but, as the sheriff concludes, "it would be too easy to call him "insane." "It would render Chigurh a special case, implying that his elimination could restore society to its natural order, and it is too late for that." (Mellen, 2008: 29) Chigurh is impossible to understand, he could be anybody and he is nobody. This killer's persona is twisted in a brilliantly *Coenesque* way.

The Sound of Silence

As is common with the Coens they display a keen eye for the American vernacular. However, in this film dialogue is remarkably sparse compared to the lively exchanges in *The Big Lebowski* or *Burn After Reading*, for instance. But the Coens use this silence to their advantage, filling the frame with vivid imagery of American life and its radical individualism. Silence is a tool not encountered before in their films. Even if Billy Bob Thornton barely uttered a syllable in *The Man Who Wasn't There*, there was still his interior monologue. Here, between the frantic action, the film conveys a frightening soundlessness and the remarkable power of sharp noises against emptiness: a bulb being unscrewed, footsteps on a wooden floor, the soft wind, or boots on hard caliche. Even Carter Burwell's score (Coen's composer since their first film) is defined by its imperceptibility, sounding like low groans and eerie murmurs. There is virtually no music on the soundtrack of this thriller, either. In some of the most captivating scenes what you hear mostly is an overpowering silence. "Even in a

movie like this where people think the sound is minimal," Ethan Coen said in an interview for the *New York Times*, "it's actually maximal in terms of the effects and how they're handled." What is unusual about *No Country for Old Men* is not simply the lack of sound but that it is a critical part of the storytelling. "Suspense thrillers in Hollywood are traditionally done almost entirely with music," he said. "The idea here was to remove the safety net that lets the audience feel like they know what's going to happen. I think it makes the movie much more suspenseful. You're not guided by the score and so you lose that comfort zone." (Lim, 2008:n.p.).

Community, Women and Resistance

The small town of Sanderson where Sheriff Bell and the Mosses live is struck by outside forces. Of course, Llewelyn's opportunism is in part to blame. Inside this small town America, community seems to exist and function. The Sheriff Bell and his deputy Wendell recognize the pickup truck; they know who it belongs to, and where Llewelyn Moss lives. The Sheriff also does not believe him to be involved in drug traffic. The Sheriff shares the story with his wife. He becomes worried about the couple's safety. Bell does not have to go to Odessa (which is about 250 km distant) to speak with Carla Jean, but he does so because he cares about the couple's well being and he is worried about the fleeing Moss. When Wendell asks him, "You think this boy Moss has got any notion of the sorts of sons of bitches that are huntin him?" he truthfully answers "I don't know. He ought to …He seen the same things I seen and it made an impression on me." However, Moss has experience in warfare, where he would have seen similar atrocities and learned to carry on in spite of them.

The Sheriff tries to intervene and deliver Llewelyn a message: turn yourself in so we can protect you. Since he is not able to catch up with him, he tries to go through Carla Jean; she assures the Sheriff that her man "can take all comers", although she will eventually ask for his help when she hears Moss is wounded. Indeed, Llewelyn believes he can, as he tells Carson Wells, "Maybe *he* [meaning Chigurh] should be worried. About me." And so an outcome is expected in the form of some showdown between these two men – the compulsive cowboy who has something to prove and the sadist who

destroys all human hopes and dreams. But expectations are once again derailed as the only showdown takes place between Chigurh and Carla Jean. She is the only character who offers a true moment of resistance. They both sit and calmly discuss the situation in her bedroom. “You got no cause to hurt me,” Carla Jean asserts. “No, but I gave my word,” Chigurh responds. “That don’t make sense,” Carla Jean tells him, taking the rhetorical position more often held by Chigurh. Chigurh explains the necessity of killing her, but offers a coin toss as a chance to defy death. Carla Jean instinctively recognizes the evil that her husband completely ignored and that the gas station owner Chigurh threatened earlier could not comprehend. Carla Jean sees through Chigurh’s metaphors and points a finger at the human being underneath:

CHIGURH	Call it.
CARLA JEAN	No. I ain’t gonna call it.
CHIGURH	Call it.
CARLA JEAN	The coin don’t have no say. It’s just you.

Chigurh’s response, “I got here the same way the coin did,” aimed at deflecting his sadism, seems weak and irrational by comparison with Carla Jean’s simple statement of truth and moral accountability: he is a cruel man who likes to confront people with the randomness of life and death. Women seem to be the only ones who do not fear and are even able to stand up to Anton Chigurgh: another woman in the film who refuses to wilt is the large woman working in the office of Moss’s trailer park. When Chigurh goes in asking for Moss he seems to have hit a brick wall. “Did you not hear me?” she asks extremely irritated “We can't give out no information.” When he pauses to listen for sounds of other people in the premises, she looks ready to take physical action. For all Chigurh’s skills at intimidation, he is not able to frighten any of the women in the film.

In Bell’s relationship with his wife, Loretta always functions as the voice of reason and common sense. In this, Bell’s relationship with his wife contrasts with Llewelyn’s with his. Judging by the hard time that the Sheriff is always trying to avoid, Bell and Loretta share more equitable gender roles. When he needs a second horse to investigate the hard country, he borrows hers but insists that Wendell ride it, admitting: “Anything happens to Loretta’s horse I can tell you right now I don’t want to be the party that was aboard.” Loretta Bell

plays no part in the Western myth, where women were supportive in the background. She is a woman with not only her own life, but also her own horse. In Bell's and Moss' marriages, - with Bell's strongly reminiscent of the loving, supportive relationship between Marge and Norm in *Fargo* - the Coens once again suggest that human connection, bonding, and caring prevail anytime against Hollywood-style man-alone heroism. Comparing the relaxed, warm atmosphere of the Moss trailer or the Bell home with the dreary and rundown motels showing tasteless signs, flimsy walls and soulless decorations, these obviously come out behind. For all of the films violence and bloodletting it is also infused with regular and constant references to the human capacity for commitment and love, specifically in marriage. "Down here," *Blood Simple*'s opening voiceover points out, "you're on your own", referring to Texas. Yet this is not always the case: despite the Coens' reputation as skeptics they also offer a study in redemptive love and friendship. However such relationships must be worked at and often yield vulnerability as well as support.

Conclusion

"And for what? For a little bit of money." (Marge in *Fargo*)

A major point to be made about the films of Joel and Ethan Coen is that it is all about "a little bit of money", or at least about who controls it. Money and the greed which accompanies it are the motors which drive Coen characters. However, because these characters are always involved in a cloud of unknowing and uncertainty, something always goes wrong. They are absolutely incapable of projecting themselves into the future so that they might evaluate the consequences of their decisions. That makes them fascinating, this inability to have a perspective, and simultaneously eccentric characters with absurd behavior. Despite this fact, they are never tragic, they are simply pathetic characters with questionable values and identities, to whom the very worst does happen, albeit humorously. While in *The Big Lebowski,* humor is used as a form of social commentary, *Fargo* is less humorous and *No Country for Old Me*n even less as they gradually offer more clinical studies of human behavior and frailty. All three present local, but universal themes: fundamental questions concerning the place of duty, responsibility, necessity, the meaning of life / death, and chance are dealt with, even if this is done amid eruptions of violence and occasionally out and out carnage. Another important point to be made about the films of the Coen brothers is that while they have postmodern characteristics, they engage dialogically with genre and classical films, in order to bring into question accepted areas of genre realism.

In the preface to *Fargo*'s screenplay the Coens write: "the world, however wide, has folds and wrinkles that bring distant places together in strange ways" (ix). *Fargo* brings together "ordinary" people of modest ambitions, the so-called "salt of the earth", those who work and raise families, as well as the sociopaths who live among them, people who out of greed, or pathology, or even due to their own incompetence, commit the most atrocious crimes. As Palmer appropriately suggests, "contemporary American culture, even in its most mild-mannered midcontinental version, manifests an underside that can erupt at any time into homicidal fury". (2004: 100) Human beings can, in fact, do the worst things they can imagine to one another. The characters suffer from an evident

absence of social guidance, paralleling other Coen films already discussed, resulting from the pursuit of individualism and the transitory nature of relationships in contemporary American society. Moreover, Coen films are populated with bizarre and peculiar people and situations. In *Fargo,* while hot on the trail of murder suspects, Marge takes time off for a date with an old boyfriend. The two criminals, after having sex with the prostitutes, watch the *Tonight* show in a truly domestic scene. Carl buries the hard-earned ransom money beneath a snow-covered fence with hundreds of identical posts, making its recovery impossible. Then he gets into a senseless fight with Grimsrud about the splitting of the Ciera even though he has stashed away almost a million dollars which makes his death all the more memorable and darkly comic. Another unusual source of comedy in the story comes from the opposition between the constant politeness of the odd characters and the accumulating murders.

In *The Big Lebowski* the characters seem to express a desire to escape the fragmentation, corruption, and alienation, so much a part of American society after Vietnam, they portray a desperate desire for human bonding. Coen characters are usually regional and ethnic stereotypes, whose predictable quirks are not treated gently. This is extremely evident in *The Big Lebowski*: they constantly bicker over politically correct linguistic distinctions; they resort to violence to resolve conflict; they mal-appropriate and mis-appropriate everything from marmots to Pomeranians; the Dude holds up the wrong hand to show he is not wearing a wedding ring and Walter smashes the wrong car. The eccentric Dude goes shopping in his underclothes and bathrobe while wearing sunglasses, and stretches inelegantly in the bowling alley as Walter and Donny bicker before him. Walter can get the Dude a toe by 3 p.m. with green nail polish on it. The film presents a dysfunctional form of public engagement in contemporary America. While bowlers congregate in teams and leagues, they inevitably bowl competitively, and following Robert Putnam's rather conservative perspective in *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, they always bowl alone. More than anything, it is the pursuit of radical individualism which hinders community.

In *No Country for Old Men*, the Coens explore how human beings struggle with the moral and ethical complexities of their condition. Similar to the other

Coen protagonists before him, Llewelyn Moss is driven by a compulsion that is "dumber than hell", but he proceeds without regard. Much like Jerry Lundegaard and the Dude, Moss thrives on confusing himself. This character trait can be found throughout the brothers' career: the childlike schemer who will always sacrifice his given predicament for an elusive promise of something better. Most importantly, the protagonist always fails at achieving the promise of that special thing that he believes will bring satisfaction to his life. They are always about to do something stupid, and nothing, not even impending death, will stop them. Normally, after falling into these schemes for self-improvement, they constantly end up in some kind of tragic or comic misery, as the schemes never pay off. Anton Chigurh, on the other hand, represents an amplified version of the "bad guy", all in one: cynical detective Visser (*Blood Simple*), the lonely rider of the Apocalypse (Leonard Smalls in *Raising Arizona*), and the kidnapper Gaer Grimsrud (*Fargo*). Chigurh is a sadist who proceeds forward no matter what. He is also an atypical Coen character because he manages to escape.

The three films I have chosen to discuss provide insight into the Coens' personal vision and career as filmmakers. The brothers began writing the script for their first film *Blood Simple* during 1980, Ethan was twenty-three and Joel twenty-six years old. When the film is finally released in 1984 both brothers are in their late twenties, that's why their view on life, evidently satirical, was more comedic (*Blood Simple* presents a darkly comic vision of Texas). *No Country for Old Men* is a retrospective view for the Coens, they go back to the location and time period of their first film. However, in 2007, (about twenty-three years later) the violence and crime are not viewed or depicted as comedic any longer. What they found hilarious in their twenties has now acquired the look of a serious massacre, an "all-out war", in their fifties. The murderous wasteland spread before Moss in *No Country for Old Men* brings the anxieties of war and terrorism to mind, a devastation which would also fit any war scenario. This is not surprising, as the Coens too have grown older, resembling Sheriff Bell: while he is able to understand how things happen he cannot figure out why they happen, making this film a perfect bookend to my discussion. Sheriff Bell, as the conscience of *No Country for Old Men*, inquires about the nature of violence, comments on death and time's unyielding forward march, but above all questions, just like the Coens.

In McCarthy's novel, Bell repeatedly presents us with considerations on the changing times: a survey which was carried out in American schools in the forties offered as biggest problems "chewing gum and copying homework"; forty years later the answers are "rape, arson, murder, drugs and suicide". Another time, he narrates a conversation he had with a woman who told him "I don't like the way this country is headed. I want my granddaughter to be able to have an abortion" to which Bell replies, "Well mam I don't think you got any worries about the way the country is headed. The way I see it going I don't have much doubt but what she'll be able to have an abortion. I'm goin to say that not only will she be able to have an abortion, she'll be able to have you put to sleep." (2005: 195-197) His words describe a progressively violent and uncaring society where the relentless pursuit of self-interest inevitably proves suicidal. Death is a constant feature in the Coen filmography and is represented in a variety of ways by the brothers (the other two films discussed also deal with life and death). While they simultaneously question and deconstruct the Western, *No Country for Old Men* - more than any of the other two films - leaves the Western dead. This film removes the metaphors, the comedy and the Busby Berkeley-inspired dream sequences, in favor of a more direct expression of death's grip on life.

The women in Coen films, unlike the men, realize that they have a choice. In the three films discussed in the present work, women are depicted as successful and/or satisfied whereas men are the ones who come up with the impossible schemes for self-improvement. The horrifying disorders shown in their stories are all caused by hysterically inadequate men. Significantly, the only characters in their films who lose their tempers or act impulsively are male. Women try to use logic and common sense to contain the emotional instability of men. They are the ones who appear to offer some hope and guidance, whether in marriage, or in alternative social arrangements.

In striving to get to the heart of these films, I have chosen a methodology that has been mostly successful but has disadvantages, all the same. My close textual analysis of these films was primarily character and theme-based, which was appropriate given that these films centre on often eccentric individuals bereft of a sense of community. And yet, there was not room enough to

elaborate on the significance that violence, music and cinematographic technique have had in expressing these films' mood and disposition.

After watching a Coen brothers film, one is left with a sense that there is more going on than what one is getting. Their films are like the world: there is always more to understand; there is always more to get. Albert Camus once stated in his *Notebooks* "The whole art of Kafka consists in forcing the reader to reread" (quoted in Dirda, 2008: n.p.), and the same might be said of each Coen brothers' film. The brothers offer many opportunities for discussion and with each new film they raise unanswered enigmatic questions: What is the meaning of the ambiguous meeting between Marge and Mike Yanagita in *Fargo?* Is the landlord's performance piece in *The Big Lebowski* merely a gratuitous digression? Is Chigurh indeed behind the door when the Sheriff walks into the motel room? A conventional movie would not leave loose ends.

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